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Vol. LXXVII.

THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE;

Or, The Train Wreckers of the Union Pacific. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.



ATTACHING HIS INSTRUMENT TO ONE OF THE WIRES THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE SENT A SWIFT CALL TO SILVER LEAF STATION.

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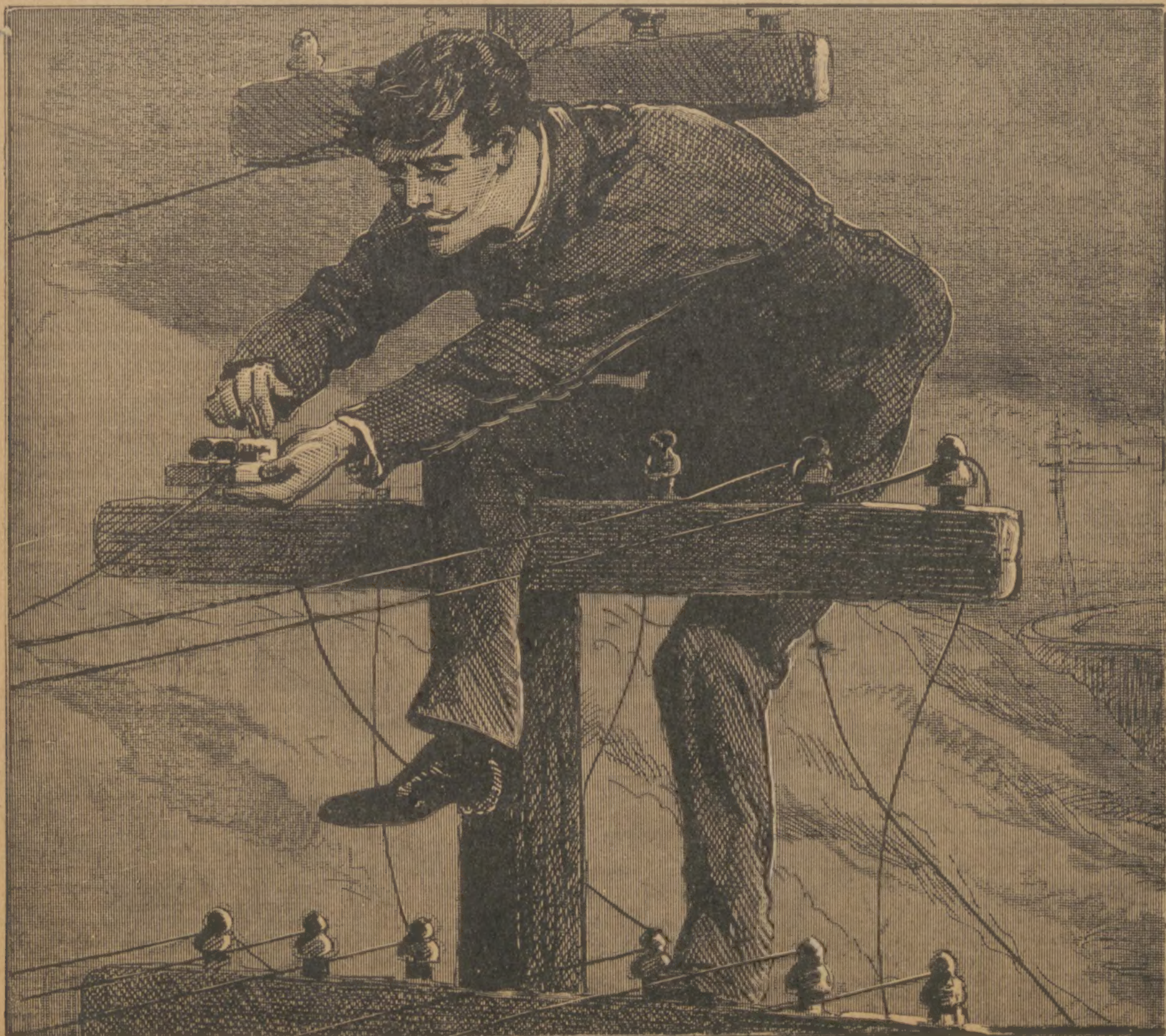
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ATTACHING HIS INSTRUMENT TO ONE OF THE WIRES THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE SENT A SWIFT CALL TO SILVER LEAF STATION.

THE Telegraph Detective; OR, THE Train Wreckers of the Union Pacific.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "SPARKLER SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MESSAGE FROM MID-AIR.

"HELLO! That means crooked work, or I'm an angel!"

Through the misty night came the indistinct sound of metal clicking dully against metal; and holding his breath, the better to listen, Alick McPherson bent forward, "all ears," for the time being.

Again he caught that suspicious sound, and this time fairly located it as finding birth in yonder deep cut, where the double track of the Union Pacific wound its way through the tortuous "Grape-vine Gorge."

A low, almost fierce ejaculation passed the detective's lips, followed by the muttered words:

"I might have known it; I did know 'twould be right here, if anywhere. The worst spot along the whole line for a wreck, and—heavens! If it's too late to warn the Express of—Steady, old man!"

Crouching lower amidst those rugged rocks, McPherson opened his watch, then struck a match, shielding the flame with joined hands long enough to read the hour; then extinguishing the tiny torch with a quick breath of relief.

"None too early, yet there's time enough, unless—Get there, Eli!"

It would have been a difficult bit of ground to cover even with the aid of broad daylight, and was actually perilous to limb if not to life this dark evening, when the rocks and stones were rendered unusually slippery by the mist which promised soon to strengthen into rain.

But Alick McPherson was noted for his pure grit, and just now he had an additional incentive which left no room for thought of failure.

Yet it seemed a terribly long five minutes, before he could win his first glimpse of Grape-vine Gorge, and then, as he peered through the falling mist, his hands clinched in fierce rage.

One dark shape was holding a lantern, the dull rays of which were cast here and there, as called for by the lawless workers, some half-dozen in number, so far as the detective could make out in that hurried glance.

"Devils, all! Think of a crowded Express going off the rails at a point like that! And what's to hinder?"

Man of iron nerve though he was, Alick McPherson turned a bit paler as he asked himself this question.

The train-wreckers were working swiftly; yet systematically, some drawing spikes from the ties, others prying the rails out of plumb, the more surely to throw the coming Express off the narrow road-bed over the rocks and down to the mist-hidden river, whose sullen roarings could be heard only too distinctly.

The entire line could hardly have offered a worse place for a disastrous wreck than Grape-vine Gorge, noted in railroad annals for its short and sharp curves, forming a double letter S in a short quarter of a mile, and crossing the brawling river thrice within those brief limits.

McPherson shivered anew as a turn of yonder lantern afforded him a passing glimpse of the arched culvert, just beyond the point where the lawless gang was at work; and then his brain worked swiftly over the problem: how could he avert the threatening tragedy?

As will be explained later, he was thoroughly familiar with his present surroundings, and knew that the only point where he could hope to gain the road-bed within at least a couple of miles was right here; and a single slip, a single false step on those damp rocks, might not only endanger life and limb by the fall, but would almost certainly bring yonder murderous knaves upon him, thirsting for blood.

Yet Alick hesitated barely half a minute, and those seconds were consumed, not in planning his own safety, but in determining how he might the more certainly warn the coming Express of this grim peril, menacing the lives of every person on board.

"Thirty miles to Silver Leaf, and that only a way-station!" his swift reflections ran. "Will Calhoun be awake? Can I call him up in time to flag the train? If not—Get there, Eli!"

Without a thought of his own imminent peril, the detective took the desperate plunge; it really seemed nothing else, just then!

Slipping, sliding, jumping with cat-like activity, and almost its feline silence, McPherson descended into Grape-vine Gorge, trusting more to the noise unavoidably made by the wreckers to cover his advance than to either luck or skill on his own part.

More than once the brave fellow narrowly escaped a fall which could hardly have done less than cripple him for life; but, just as often he pressed on, his sole hope and desire being to send timely warning to the night agent at Silver Leaf Station to halt the menaced Express.

The time-limit was so terribly brief! The seconds were fleeting so swiftly! And—if Isaac Calhoun should be sleeping at his post!

Nearly breathless, clothes torn and flesh not only bruised but bleeding in several places, Detective McPherson finally reached the track-level.

So far as he could see, the wreckers were still in complete ignorance of his coming, and shaking a clinched fist their way, the detective started down the road-bed, other hand fumbling in his pocket to make sure no harm had come to his faithful ally, through whose aid he hoped to flash a warning over the wires in time to halt the Lightning Express at Silver Leaf Station.

But, ere a dozen steps were taken, McPherson halted abruptly, an ugly suspicion making itself felt.

"What if they've posted guards? Surely Flashy Fred and his devils in human guise wouldn't risk being run into, now?"

A low, sullen rumble of distant thunder made itself heard, just then, and, a bit later, came an additional flash of lightning.

McPherson instinctively looked upward, and by the electric glow he caught sight of the dangling ends of severed wires, showing yet another precaution taken by the train-wreckers.

That one glance, then as darkness followed, the detective looked toward the knaves at their nefarious work, hardly more than fifty yards further up the track.

Could he hope to escape observation should he climb this pole in order to send his message from mid-air?

The risk was great, and yet, was it any less than chancing an encounter with the probable sentinel further along the track?

That reflection decided McPherson, and clasping the damp and slippery telegraph pole he climbed upward as best he might without the aid of the customary spurs.

Under less urgent circumstances the intrepid man might have failed to accomplish this feat, but with such immense interests at stake he knew of no such word as failure.

Grasping one of the cross-arms, McPherson quickly made his hold secure by crooking a leg over the middle arm, then turned head to glance over to where the wreckers were busily at work.

Here and there flashed the dim light, while each one of the lawless knaves seemed doubly in earnest as the minutes crept along and the hour for their dread harvest drew nigh.

Just the one look; then Alick drew forth his pocket instrument and quickly attaching it to one of the severed wires, tapped a swift call to Silver Leaf Station.

Once, twice, thrice, as swift as his trained fingers could manipulate the sender, then breathlessly waiting for an answer!

In vain!

Not a sound save yonder hoarse commands as the man with a lantern directed the wreckers, followed by the strokes of metal against metal, or of creaking, groaning ties being forced out of place by bars and levers.

Click! click! click!

With fierce impatience vibrated the in-

strument, now, sending call after call along the damp wire to the distant station, for right well the Telegraph Detective knew that it was only a matter of brief minutes now, when the crowded Express would flash past Silver Leaf unwarned, to thunder along toward destruction at the rate of fifty miles an hour!

Cool and damp though the night was, and raw the chilling winds that struck him high in air, Alick was fairly sweating in his fierce anxiety, tingling in every nerve, hardly able to smother the impatient shout which strove to pass his lips as his repeated call remained unanswered.

Thirty miles away, yet he could see it all!

Isaac Calhoun placidly sleeping on his narrow cot, caring little or nothing whether or no he was awake when the Express should thunder past the station, since no stop was made there unless on urgent signal.

Click! click! click!

Still no answer, and McPherson knew that the train was almost due to pass Silver Leaf Station, after which but a single hope remained: for him to speed along the track until out of sight and hearing of the evil gang, then light a beacon which the engineer could not possibly mistake!

And yet, if the wreckers had posted look-outs both up and down the track?

A man's brain will work wondrously fast under such circumstances, and never before did the Telegraph Detective do swifter or keener thinking than while perched in mid-air, trying his best to call up the night-agent at Silver Leaf.

Click! click! click!

Gods! Would the fellow never hear, never make answer? Just to think of all those precious lives dependent upon one sleepy-headed official!

Click! click! click!

In desperate haste McPherson worked his instrument, making noise enough to risk his own discovery by yonder ruthless villains; still no answer came; and he was on the point of releasing the wire and trusting to luck to pass the possible guards stationed by the train-wreckers, when an electric thrill caused his sensitive fingers to tingle, and he gave a low, eager cry as he knew his call had at last roused Calhoun!

Without waiting to hear what the night-agent might have to say, McPherson swiftly clicked off the startling message from mid-air!

"Hold the Express, for God's sake! Wreckers tearing up track at Grape-vine! Am I in time?"

A few incoherent sounds which plainly showed how intensely agitated the night-agent was by this startling message, then—silence!

"Flag the Express! You must hold it, Cal!" swiftly tapped off the detective; but now, as before, no answer came back!

What did it mean? Had the Express already flashed past the station, and was Calhoun so totally unmanned as to be unable to reply?

Or, had one of the train-wrecking gang captured him and taken full possession of the station?

McPherson's blood seemed to run cold at this dread thought, but he again and again sounded his urgent call at brief intervals, trying to hope even against all hope.

For the time being he was lost to all else. He gave no thought to his own peril, and kept working his instrument with feverish energy, each moment seeming an hour, each minute a veritable age!

Then, guided by those swift sounds, a pair of inimical eyes ferreted out that clinging shape in mid-air, and a fierce challenge rung forth from the road-bed below:

"Ah-ha, ye devil, ye! What ye thyrin' to do up yan way, annyhow? Come oot o' thot, now, or O'll blow ye cl'ane to blazes, begob!"

CHAPTER II.

THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE AT BAY.

TAKEN completely by surprise, Alick McPherson looked downward, to catch sight of an indistinct shape almost directly below his elevated perch.

Past doubting it was one of the nefarious gang, and as another forked flash of light-

ning briefly illuminated the scene, the detective saw an armed hand raised in his direction, and instinctively he swung himself to one side, ducking his head behind the cross-bar of the telegraph pole.

None too soon, either!

A red glow lit up the gloom for an instant, and McPherson felt as though a red-hot iron had been swept quickly across his shoulder, and from past experience knew that the bullet had cut through the skin in its hasty passage.

It was merely a flesh wound, hardly sufficient to bring blood, but it was enough to show him how surely his life was forfeited unless he could foil the lawless gang whose startled cries were now audible.

"Come down oot o' thot, ye divil, ye!" fairly howled the Irishman as he sent his lead upon its vicious mission. "Hi-yah, b'yes! Oi've threed some sort av divil up a gooshberry bush, faith! Coom an hilp—"

A second shot, the ugly whistle of which the Telegraph Detective distinctly heard as it passed harmlessly by his ducking head; then McPherson took swift action, knowing only too well that his life hung in the balance.

Making no effort to release his instrument, but swiftly tapping the sounder in alarm as he swung himself into position for a leap, vaguely hoping that even yet his warning might prove efficient, the dauntless detective steadied himself for an instant, then boldly leaped from the cross-arm, shooting swiftly downward, straight as fate, for the excited Patlander who was trying for yet another shot at his human target in mid-air.

Swiftly as that leap was made, the aim of the Telegraph Detective proved true; the train-wrecker was crushed to earth by that living catapult without time to spit out a curse at enemy or warning to friend.

Although the shock was materially lessened by striking the Irishman, McPherson was pitched awkwardly forward across the rails, receiving further bruises yet luckily breaking no bones.

Half-stunned, the detective scrambled to his feet; brushing a hand over eyes to clear his vision, its mate fumbling at belt where his revolvers still clung to their scabbards.

The alarm had been taken, and abandoning their nefarious work, the murderous gang was rushing that way, eager to kill or capture the enemy so oddly "treed" by their pal, Paddy McCoon.

There was at least half a score of the ruffians, and knowing that he could expect precious little mercy at their hands, if once fairly cornered, McPherson sprang swiftly along the road-bed in flight, yet with brain clearing, and nerve rallying to meet the emergency.

In right hand he gripped a revolver ready for use when the critical moment might come, his keen eyes flashing ahead and to each side of the double track, on guard against possible enemy in front.

A trained athlete in almost every sense of the term, Alick McPherson felt that he could hold his own with the best of the gang in a race along the road-bed; but, would he have that chance?

Could he even hope that no outlooks had been posted by the leader of the train wreckers?

Hardly had he time to ask himself this question, when it found an answer, for one of the ruffians in hot chase sent forth a far-reaching yell which was shortly answered from the gloom ahead; and McPherson knew only too well that his flight was barred by at least one armed foe!

"Yelp, ye hounds! Maybe ye can kill, but you'll never take alive! If only the train—Heaven have mercy on the passengers!"

Even while his own life was in imminent peril, Alick McPherson had thoughts for the human freight being whirled along at breathless speed to—what?

Had Calhoun been roused in time to flag and warn the Express?

Had the train already passed Silver Leaf when he roused up to give that incoherent answer to the urgency call? Or, had those unintelligible sounds been but a ghastly jest played by one of the evil gang who had already taken full possession of the station?

Tortured by those thoughts and fears, a

less cool-witted and steady-nerved man might easily have broken down altogether; but not so brave Alick McPherson!

At first he was strongly tempted to run the gantlet, trusting to luck to carry him safely past yonder guards, either by dodging or by shooting a passage through, then to outfooting the wreckers and gaining sufficient lead to start a fire which would serve to halt the Express; but the chances were heavily against this scheme, and a second thought shaped a far different plan, whose very audacity promised success.

Giving a sharp yell of defiance as he sped along the road-bed, the detective fired a couple of shots in quick succession as though meeting with an armed foe, then sprang lightly off the track and taking to the nearly perpendicular wall of rocks to his left hand.

A full dozen shots came from excited pursuers in answer to his burning powder, but none of the hastily-aimed missiles found a living billet, and McPherson chuckled grimly to himself, as he sought the handiest cover.

"Come on, ye whelps of Satan! Come on, and keep a-running until—just give me a chance to double back, and I'll fool you, even yet!"

It really seemed as though the Telegraph Detective was about to succeed in his bold ruse, for the train-wreckers, led by a tall athletic fellow whom McPherson had no difficulty in recognizing, raced past his hiding-place in their savage ardor; but then, ere he could take advantage of the opening thus afforded, a change was made.

The big train-wrecker gave a hoarse shout, then the gang came to an abrupt halt. His voice added:

"Steady there, lads, until—Hello, pard!"

"Hyar I be, boss!" came the reply from ahead. "What's the row, an' who's bu'sted all over loose this-a-way, anyhow?"

"Have you seen any one trying to slip past you?"

"You bet I hain't, then! Nary critter, not even a durn shadder could foolish yer uncle, boss!"

"All eyes open, then!" fiercely cried the leader of the train-wreckers, turning and rushing back along the track. "Part this way, the rest go ahead! He's hiding among the rocks, somewhere, and we can take him—we've just got to take him, dead or alive!"

The Telegraph Detective listened to all this with an interest more readily imagined than portrayed; but now he showed his teeth in a grim smile, lifting the hammer of his revolver far enough to enable him to twirl the cylinder across his open palm, thus making sure the weapon was in good working condition.

"Another nail in your coffin, Flashy Fred!" McPherson muttered as he gathered both legs beneath his body, ready for quick work when the right moment should come. "Dead or alive, eh? Well, it's catching before killing, and maybe I'll get a bite while you're making a square meal, anyway!"

If he could only feel certain that the Lightning Express had been checked! If he could only know Calhoun had roused up in time to flag and warn the train of peril ahead!

As yet the gloom was too deep for perfect recognition through eyesight alone, but McPherson believed he had recognized that commanding voice, and if so, he knew that not the slightest degree of mercy would be shown him in case he should fall alive into the hands of the desperado gang.

Again that commanding voice rung forth:

"Block the way, lads, and don't leave an opening big enough for even a ghost to slip through! Now, steady, all! Light up, you fellows!"

In the fierce excitement of the moment, the single lantern seen in use by McPherson had been dropped and the light extinguished; but now he crouched lower in his place of hiding as he saw dull lights begin to glimmer, both up and down the track.

He knew that a systematic search was about to be made, and too, only too well, that discovery was but a question of minutes, at best.

He gripped his guns firmly, at the same time listening with all his powers to see if he could catch sound of an approaching train!

If he could only feel at ease on that one all-important point!

Had Calhoun performed his duty? Had he flagged the Express in time, or was the train even now speeding along to destruction and horrible slaughter, all unwarned, all unsuspecting the hideous death-trap set by the murderous train-wreckers?

Surely an answer of some sort had come to his last call? Who else could have given it save the night-agent? And yet, why so incoherent, unless Calhoun had roused up too late to avert the dread peril?

If he could only break through yonder armed line, free to race along the road-bed to flag the train ere it was eternally too late!

If he could shoot his way through! Why not?

The mere fact of his asking such a question proved how desperate the undaunted detective was growing, brain-racked by those awful fears.

Already several lanterns were ablaze, both up and down the track, those holding them flashing rays over the rock wall, searching each nook and cranny, eager to sight the human game and give all hands a chance to shoot to the death.

McPherson saw his enemies gradually drawing closer to his refuge, and knowing that discovery could not be averted much longer, he prepared to take action while yet he could move without being instantly turned into a living target for nearly a score of revolvers or rifles.

It was a forlorn hope, at best, but he resolved to make a dash away from the wall, across the road-bed, deeming it barely possible that he might be able to crawl through yonder stones and rocks lining the high bank of the river, and thus get beyond the line of wreckers on that side, then race along the track to even yet halt the Express.

Waiting until just after a brilliant flash of lightning to intensify and add to the gloom, the detective left his covert and stole swiftly across the level road-bed.

But, ill-luck seemed against him that night, for hardly had he reached the nearest rail than another flash rent the clouds above, for a single instant rendering all below as light as noonday.

Only a single moment, but that sufficed for the keen-eyed wreckers, and a savage yell made known the discovery.

Louder than the others rose the voice of the herculean leader, and the detective uttered a smothered execration as he caught the words:

"Look out! It's that cursed McPherson! Jump him, lads! It's killed or be hanged, now!"

A number of shots were fired in that direction, but darkness reigned just then, and the missiles all sped wide of their mark.

Fierce with a longing for revenge, McPherson fired at the Hercules as the train-wrecker came rushing that way, but he, too, was foiled by the gloom succeeding those blinding flashes.

Cut off from flight, in either direction, with his ruthless enemies rushing upon him in force, their movements fairly visible, now, by the lanterns carried, all rays from which were flashing in his direction, the detective fell back until he stood upon the very edge of the nearly perpendicular bank of the river, revolvers in hand, ready to sell his life as dearly as possible.

As some of the wreckers rushed ahead of the lights, thus offering a fairly-good mark, the steady-nerved detective opened fire, right and left.

Oaths and curses greeted this swift fusillade, then a rattling volley came from the joining force, just as their lights flashed fairly upon the detective at bay. And, with a sharp cry, as of agony, Alick McPherson disappeared, shooting swiftly down toward the rapidly-flowing river!

CHAPTER III.

IN THE NICK OF TIME!

THIRTY miles away from Grape-vine Gorge the feverish click—click—click of the telegraph sounder was filling the dingy little office with its alarm, and only a few feet away lay Isaac Calhoun the night-agent at Silver Leaf Station, sleeping calmly and peacefully as a child.

Louder and more impatient came that

thrilling call, and even now a trained ear might easily have caught the distant whistle of the Lightning Express as it thundered along through that misty night.

Thundering along on time, with naught to fear in the way of delayed trains, given the right of way over all others, accustomed to flash past this diminutive structure with barely a blast by way of warning, almost out speeding the sound itself.

Still the alarm was sounded, warning of death and destruction lying ahead; still the agent lay peacefully on his narrow cot without thought or dream of how much depended upon his vigilance just now!

And now, the sharpened ear might even catch the faint rumble and roar of heavy wheels grinding along the ballasted bed; now the keen eye might even catch a far-away glimpse of the glowing headlight as the track wound around yonder distant point of rocks!

Then, just as the telegraph detective was discovered by Paddy McCoon on the train-wrecking gang, while tapping out his feverishly anxious call, Isaac Calhoun roused up, his trained ears catching his regulation call over the wires, and, almost without thought he reached forth a hand to tap back the answer.

"Hold the Express, for God's sake! Wreckers tearing up track at Grape-vine. Am I in time?"

With wonderful rapidity came those sounds, but Calhoun caught them correctly, and as he did so the whistle of the Express sounded in his ears, the swiftly growing rumble of wheels pounded with sickening force upon his brain!

He made some answer; just what no man ever knew, much less he whose trembling fingers struck the instrument, and then turning the signal to danger, he snatched up his lantern and sprung through the little window facing the track, taking glass and sash along with himself, fearing to lose even an instant by taking the customary exit!

The brilliant headlight fairly blinded the frightened agent, it was so terribly nigh!

He shouted, he screamed, he almost split his throat as he frantically swung his lantern in the signal to stop, jumping off the track barely in time to save himself from going down to a horrible death beneath the grinding wheels.

"Slow up! Wreckers—track torn up at Grape vine!" he screamed at the top of his voice as he reeled from the track to platform, saved from falling outright only by the wall of his dingy little depot.

He caught a glimpse of the engineer's face staring at him out of the cab, and with frantic energy repeated his warning cry amid that confusing whirl of dust and eddying currents of damp air.

"Stop! For God's sake slow up! Track torn up—oh, stop!"

Under a full head of steam the Express was thundering along, gaining impetus for the long and winding grade lying only a mile ahead; and it all seemed like a hideous nightmare dream to the agent whose slumbers now bade fair to cost scores if not hundreds of valuable lives.

A bloody mist came over his eyes and he sunk down in a salvering, nerveless heap as the palatial private car at the rear of the long Express flashed past him.

Then—oh, thank Heaven for an unmerited mercy!

Isaac Calhoun heard the air break put on, and with the harsh grating of the wheels as they whirled swiftly around on the sanded track, his overtasked brain seemed to give way, and all was a merciful blank for the time being.

When he roused up again 'twas to find the train backed up to the station, and a dozen or more intensely excited persons surrounding him, one and all pouring questions forth, as to why, what and wherefore.

"Oh, thanks to kind Heaven I wasn't too late!" Calhoun huskily panted, pale as a corpse and trembling like a leaf. "When I saw—when I knew—oh, it's terrible, terrible!"

"What is terrible?" demanded the conductor, only to be pushed aside by a tall, portly, rather pompous-looking gentleman coming from the private car, who sternly asked:

"What means all this, my man? What do I hear about a wreck?"

"Mr. Zattell, one of the directors, Calhoun," hurriedly explained the conductor. "Why did you stop us, then?"

"Train-wreckers at work—tearing up track at the Gorge, sir! And, I barely caught warning in time to signal—oh, it's broken me all up!"

"Get a brace on, Cal!" impatiently cried the conductor. "How do you know all this? Where did you get word from? Who sent it?"

"Unless it's all a mad dream!" harshly cut in Director Zattell as the suspicion struck him. "Sure you wasn't asleep at your post, agent, and dreamed it all?"

This was cutting dangerously near the truth, and it served to rally those scattered wits as naught else could have done so quickly.

"No, sir; I only wish it was a dream! I had the word from Alick McPherson; you know him, Jameson?"

"That's enough, Cal! If Mac said it—"

"I recognized his touch, and he bade me hold the Express, for train-wreckers were tearing up the track at Grape-vine Gorge. I barely had time to turn the light and jump out with my lantern. And—I'm wet as though I'd been in swimming!"

Almost pathetically came the last words, sounding oddly whimsical under the circumstances, but nothing in the shape of words could have more thoroughly exemplified the night-agent's mental torture.

With the conductor vouching for Alick McPherson, all doubt and skepticism were at an end, and swift arrangements were made for the discomfiture, if not the capture, of that evil gang of law-breakers.

The private car, occupied by Jaffrey Zattell and his son and daughter, was uncoupled from the train; the crew was armed and backed up by a goodly number of the passengers, one and all of whom seemed eager for a man-hunt by way of novelty.

While this was going on, Calhoun made repeated efforts to call up the Telegraph Detective, but in vain. Not a sound came back by way of answer, and he likewise failed to open communications with the stations lying on the further side of Grape-vine Gorge.

"They've cut the wires, and McPherson is off the line. Heaven grant the poor fellow hasn't paid for his timely warning with his life! If those devils in human shape smoked him at work—good-by Mac!"

"Who are they? Why are such demons permitted to flourish and work their evil will along this line, of all others?" demanded Mr. Zattell.

Questions far easier to ask than to answer, and no man even attempted to do the last, just then.

With the loss of but a few minutes, all told, arrangements were completed and the Express pulled out once more under full-head of steam, bound for Grape-vine Gorge, but promising to arrive at that point in far different shape from that anticipated by the train-wreckers.

When only a few miles out of Silver Leaf Station, one of the train-crew called attention to a bright light which suddenly sprung into existence far up among the rocks, glowing like a beacon on the highest point for miles around.

"A signal to the gang, for rocks!" was his excited comment.

It seemed only too probable, and as the word passed swiftly through the train, that feverish expectation turned to doubt, almost to despair.

Was it to turn out a "water-haul," after all?

That fear was to be quickly solved, for the Express was running at schedule rate, those whirring wheels fairly devouring space.

It was agreed to keep on without show of fear or of suspicion until within a short distance of the Gorge proper, then put on the air and halt in short order, pouring forth the improvised army to surprise the nefarious gang—if still possible!

But, there was the rub!

The keenest lookout failed to show aught of the enemy along the track, near at hand or far ahead in the brilliant pathway of the headlight; and when the signal was given to

slow up, still the road-bed looked free from obstructions, free from living obstacles to further progress.

Forth poured the little army, one and all feverishly eager for a brush with the train-wreckers, and, headed by the train-crew, they rushed ahead, weapons drawn and ready for instant use.

But, not a shot was fired, not a blow struck; for never a glimpse of the law-breakers was caught, and only for the sternly significant evidence given by the displaced rails and torn-up ties, it might all have been set down as in fact a nightmare dream of the somnolent night-agent at Silver Leaf.

Yet, faces turned pale and hearts beat unusually fast as those men gazed upon the broken way, then peered over the rock-wall leading down the deep-bedded river, where water would surely have completed the grim death-work begun by toppling cars and grinding machinery.

Truly 'twas the work of demons!

One look; then the alert conductor sent a man on over the culvert to torpedo the track beyond, against trains coming from the west, knowing that, with the wires down no other means of reaching such crews could be safely depended upon.

Just as all hands were absorbed in examining the broken way, a strangely dilapidated object was caught sight of, and a fierce cry of "train-wreckers!" went up, more than one menacing weapon turning that way before the cry for peace could be made and recognized.

"Mac! By all that's good and holy!" cried the conductor, rushing forward and grasping those bruised and bleeding hands. "Where on earth have you come from, Alick?"

"From the river, last," grimly answered the detective, shaking his wet and muddy garments as he spoke. "Then Calhoun got my message in time? I feared—"

"Just in the nick of time! But you—how happened it, man, dear?"

"Tell you later, Jameson, but for now, let me get my pocket-piece and send word along the line before—Out of the way, all!"

The Telegraph Detective spoke harshly in his intense anxiety, pushing swiftly through that eager and interested crowd, hurrying back to the pole from whence he had been forced to make his leap for life when discovered by the Irish member of the train-wreckers.

He had left his instrument hanging to the severed wire, and now wished to utilize it once more in sending warning of the destroyed track along the line, lest even yet a fatal wreck might prove the consequence.

Stiff from his many bruises, chilled to the core by his desperate struggle for life in the turbulent stream, Alick McPherson, refusing all help, grasped the pole and slowly but doggedly climbed up it, showing the Scottish touch of bulldogism in every movement.

But, when scarcely half-way to the lower cross-arm, a sharp cry escaped the detective's lips, and for an instant or two it seemed as though the shock he had received would send him "down by the run."

Only for the space covered by a single breath, however; then he fairly swarmed up the pole, flinging leg over cross-arm and grasping the instrument which still hung fast to the pendent wire.

An alarm was coming over the line, from Silver Leaf Station, and as the characteristic clicks smote upon his ears, the detective could hardly refrain from crying out in fierce rage and indignation.

"What's gone wrong, Mac?" impatiently asked Jameson, from below.

For answer, the Telegraph Detective read off the message as it was repeated in answer to his call:

"Satan to pay! Mr. Zattell murdered, and his son and daughter carried off! Help—help! Come quick, for Heaven's sake!"

CHAPTER IV.

ANOTHER DARK MYSTERY.

"It's Calhoun sending," added McPherson, even as he tapped back his answer to

the excited night-agent at Silver Leaf. "It's his touch, right enough, although he's fairly off his nut with excitement. Who's the party he means, anyway?"

"Jaffrey Zattell: dead—and his children missing!" ejaculated the conductor, betraying intense agitation on receipt of such truly amazing tidings. "Why, only a bit ago we left them right as right! And now—murdered! Both missing! I can't make it come true, at all!"

McPherson detached his instrument and swiftly glided down the pole to earth once more before speaking further.

Then he asked:

"Is it the Union Pacific director, Zattell, Jameson?"

"Of course! And now—quick, there! We've got to run back, hot-wheels! Murdered! And only—Curse that Calhoun if he's lying, now!"

"Don't you think it for an instant, Jameson! Calhoun's all right. But before we go, I must signal ahead, to make all secure. We've got to have a wrecking train here before we can even hope to pass the Gorge."

Running swiftly along the road-bed, to and past the culvert where the nefarious gang had so effectually blocked the way, McPherson was soon scaling another pole at the further end of the double break in the wires, apparently wholly cured of his bruises and stiffness.

It took but a few moments to call up the next station, and giving a brief statement of the facts, the Telegraph Detective bade the agent pass the word along without delay, and to hold all trains which might reach his station until after the wrecking crew could have repaired the break in the road.

This duty fairly performed, McPherson detached his instrument and slid down the pole, hurrying back to where the train was in waiting, engine hissing and throbbing with an excess of steam, everybody in feverish haste to get back to Silver Leaf Station to solve this fresh mystery of that eventful night.

Not the least anxious among them all was the Telegraph Detective, for now McPherson remembered Jaffrey Zattell, as one of the wealthiest, most influential of the Union Pacific directory.

While running backward as rapidly as they dared over such a winding, curving, tarp-graded section of the road, Conductor Jameson gave McPherson such information as lay in his power concerning the Zattell party.

Only three in number, besides the servants looking after their common needs; Jaffrey Zattell, tall, portly, pompous in both looks and speech under ordinary circumstances, yet gifted with unusual force of character, and fully capable of "doing a full day's work" in almost any company in spite of his three-score years and luxurious life.

Next came his only son, Rodney, in many respects a true chip off the old block; a Yale graduate, a trained athlete, a manly young fellow of four-and-twenty, with dark-brown hair and eyes, by no means spoiled by the many millions of his father.

Next, but by no means least, Miss Felicia; an only daughter, just out of her teens, petite as to size, lovely as to face and figure, charming as to manners: in one word, as summed up by Conductor Jameson, "pretty as a picture, and sweet as a peach!"

"Pleasure trip or business?" asked McPherson, looking out on the night to note what progress they had already made.

"You tell, for I can't!" answered the conductor, with a shoulder-shrug. "Mr. Zattell doesn't make confidants of us poor devils; wish he would, when I had a little wad to invest in stocks!"

More was said as a matter of course, but all was mere conjecture, since they only had that dispatch to go upon.

The detective kept up a busy thinking during that almost recklessly hurried run to the rear and part of his thoughts were given to Flashy Fred (as he felt almost positive the head of that lawless gang was) and the train-wreckers.

Was this but a portion of that murderous scheme? Were they playing for more than robbery of a wrecked train?

But, if so, why murder the capitalist instead of taking him captive, with his now missing children and heirs?

Sure abduction would pay them better than assassination, since they could only hope to gain ransom money through Jaffrey Zattell himself?

Take it all together and it was a mystery not to be solved by even so keen and shrewd a brain, without more to work upon than the detective could glean from that hurried dispatch from Silver Leaf.

Excitement ran high indeed when the lights of the station were finally sighted, and even before the train could be brought to a halt, more than half of its list of passengers were flocking out of the coaches, one and all eager to feast upon the gory details.

But, at word from Detective McPherson, the conductor marshaled his train-crew and surrounded the private car in which Jaffrey Zattell was now to be found, according to the speech of the station agent.

"He isn't dead, though I thought he was when I called you up," Calhoun hurriedly explained as McPherson questioned him. "He's alive, but badly hurt, and—"

"Help keep back the crowd!" tersely cut in the Telegraph Detective as he hurried away toward the palatial private car. "Don't let any person enter without I call for them!"

With Conductor Jameson alone, Alick McPherson entered the coach, and by the soft glow of the lamps he saw the capitalist lying on a divan in the saloon compartment.

His usually florid face was almost ghastly pale, and though one of his servants was bathing both face and head with a moistened sponge, the show of flowing blood was still in evidence.

Yet Mr. Zattell started up to a sitting posture at that entrance, looking very unlike a corpse as his countenance lit up with a brief glow of hope, his husky voice asking:

"My children; you've found them? You've brought back my darling girl, my noble boy, sirs?"

"Not yet, Mr. Zattell," gravely answered the detective, taking the sponge and motioning the colored man to retire at once.

With a hollow groan that head fell back, and as a pair of trembling hands came up to hide his face from view, all could see how intensely the millionaire was suffering, in mind, even more than in body.

"Have courage, sir!" quickly urged the detective, pressing the now cool sponge gently upon the lacerated scalp. "We'll bring back your son and daughter, safe and sound, never fear. Only—If you could only give us some definite clue to work upon?"

"How did it all happen, Mr. Zattell?" asked Jameson, no longer able to smother his intense curiosity. "Who hurt you? And how did they carry off the young people without—"

"Don't! you hurt—you torture me, man!" groaningly cried the injured millionaire. "How could they do it? Devils—devils, all!"

"It's for your own good, sir, as well as for the good of your dear ones that we feel obliged to question you," gravely, earnestly urged the detective. "Unless you can tell us something—"

"What can I tell? I don't know—only I feel like a log! I never knew—never saw or heard—Oh, my poor, poor, little girl!"

Just then a sound from the rear drew a glance that way from the detective, and he frowned a bit as he recognized the station-agent entering without being summoned; but he made no immediate objection, for he now hoped to glean at last a ray of light from Calhoun, since Mr. Zattell seemed wholly incapable of affording any actual information.

But before question could be asked or answer given, the injured millionaire looked up to recognize the new-comer, and with a hoarsely savage cry he rose to his feet, plunging forward and clutching the astonished night-agent by the throat, shaking him much as a cat shakes a fat mouse, harshly panting forth:

"You devil! I'll kill you like a mad wolf! You're in this devils' game! You helped carry off my girl, my son!"

Taken by surprise fully as much as was Calhoun, both McPherson and Jameson quickly interposed, breaking that vicious hold and rescuing the half-strangled agent from the millionaire's clutches.

Both men vouched for the perfect honesty of Isaac Calhoun, and once more the sorely-tortured father staggered back to lie down upon the wet and blood-stained divan, groaning in his mental agony and renewed physical weakness.

How completely unmanned the father was, showed clearly when Alick McPherson again strove to win a possible clue to this dark mystery; for the director turned savagely upon his questioner, demanding who and what he was, and by what right he poked nose into private affairs.

With grave patience McPherson explained:

"I am a detective in the employ of your directory, Mr. Zattell. It was I who sent warning of the black work at Grape-vine Gorge. If you need any further reference, sir, I can produce the papers to back up my words."

"In our employ?" fiercely ejaculated Zattell, rising to a sitting posture once more, his blue eyes glowing like orbs of polished steel. "Then why haven't you put a stop to all this infernal train-wrecking? Why do you permit such evil knaves—Heavens! My poor, poor little girl in such devilish hands as his!"

In a metaphorical sense the Telegraph Detective pricked up his ears at this, scenting a possible solution to the mystery; but again the injured man fell back, groaning, gasping, turning head from side to side like one in an excess of torture both of brain and of body.

For a few minutes the detective tried in vain to secure a coherent answer from those lips, but, just as he was on the point of giving over in despair of learning aught there while Jaffrey Zattell was so terribly excited, the capitalist again abruptly sprang up, grasping those cool, strong hands, huskily speaking:

"You say you're a detective? Then save my girl, my boy, sir, and I'll make you rich for the rest of your life—I swear it!"

"I'll do my level best, Mr. Zattell, but not for reward—for duty. If this is the work of that same evil gang of wreckers, 'twill be a work of love for me! They tried to kill me, now I'll run them to earth or lose my life trying!"

CHAPTER V.

STRIKING A POSSIBLE CLEW.

THIS firm declaration, almost vow, seemed to greatly enhearten the sorely stricken parent, giving the Telegraph Detective cause for hoping better things in the near future.

As matters stood now, McPherson was utterly in the dark, without even the slightest clue to lead him toward a correct solution of this strange affair.

"Brace him up, pardner," Alick swiftly whispered to the train conductor, aside. "Fill him to the nozzle with whisky if you can't do any better, but brace him up! He's got to tell all, first or last!"

Leaving Jameson to perform this duty, then, the detective looked elsewhere for a possible clue to assault and abduction, first tackling the night agent as the one most likely to extract such information from.

But, little better than disappointment met his efforts, so far as Isaac Calhoun was concerned.

During the absence of the train, the agent busied himself in part with telegraphing the tidings toward the east, stating the necessity of a wrecking train before the Express could proceed past Grape-vine George.

He neither saw nor heard anything unusual about the station, and the startling discovery of the assaulted capitalist was made by accident, rather than through his suspicions being aroused.

Word had come back from one of the stations along the line asking questions which Calhoun deemed it best to submit to the Union Pacific director before answering, and receiving no response to his tapping at the door of the private car, he ventured to enter, almost the first object meeting his horrified gaze was the prostrate figure of Jaffrey Zattell, lying in the aisle, looking far more like a bloody corpse than a living man.

Calhoun shouted his alarm, but no response was made, the colored servants having gone with the main train to Grape-vine Gorge, and nothing whatever was to be seen of either son or daughter.

He ran hastily through the car from end to end, finding the young couple missing, then rushed back to his office to try to call up Alick McPherson or some other at the break in the line.

This was all that could be extracted from the night-agent, and the detective turned his attention elsewhere, looking for foot or horse tracks near the scene, only to be foiled by the countless imprints left upon the mist-dampened soil by the excited passengers when they rushed forth from the coaches.

Hoping for better things with the coming of dawn, McPherson abandoned his quest in that direction, for the present, finding his train-lantern of little service under the circumstances.

Just then Jameson came hurriedly up, to utter:

"The old gent wants you, Mac; he's got a brace on, and if you work it rightly maybe you can hit off the right scent, old boy!"

"Thanks; where is he?"

"In his— No! Yonder he comes, now!"

"Good enough!" as he glimpsed the railroad magnate emerging from the private car. "See that none of the curious crowd us too close, will you, pard? Zattell knows heap-sight more than he feels like telling, I fancy; and he'll be easier managed alone then in the midst of a crowd."

Conductor Jameson readily promised to do his best, and the Telegraph Detective has tened away to rejoin the capitalist.

Mr. Zattell was still powerfully agitated, but something of his customary will-power had returned, and he looked a far different man now than he had been but a few brief minutes earlier in the night.

"Nothing, as yet," responded the detective, as the bereaved father questioned him. "It's a mighty poor time and place to look for sign, sir, and I really reckon you can throw more light on the question than can be picked up elsewhere, try we never so hard."

Did the old gentleman flinch through fear of having a dark secret unvalled, or was that slight recoil simply because his growing hopes were dashed to earth again?

Alick McPherson was hardly assured on either point, yet he felt fairly certain that, if he would, Jaffrey Zattell could throw valuable light upon that mysterious assault and double abduction.

"I don't— How can I tell you more than I have already revealed? I saw nothing, heard nothing to warn me of impending peril. I was just stepping inside my car, when—the whole heavens seemed falling upon my poor head!"

His tones grew husky and uncertain, just then; but, quickly rallying, Jaffrey Zattell added:

"That is all I can tell you, Mr. McPherson. I was knocked senseless by that cowardly blow, and when I revived, my children were—were both gone!"

There was no room left for doubting the perfect accuracy of this account, though suspicion still clung to that swiftly-working brain.

Why had Zattell made such a strange choice of words while speaking of his daughter's captivity? And over the detective ran the very words:

"My poor, poor little girl in such devilish hands as his!"

Thus had spoken the sorely stricken father while he was too intensely agitated to wholly mask his deeper emotions.

Surely those words pointed toward a personal enemy! Zattell would not have so spoken if he had no idea whose hands his idolized daughter had fallen, would he?

All this flashed through the mind of the Telegraph Detective during those few seconds of silence, but he was too shrewd to alarm his game by moving prematurely, and letting that important point pass by for the present, he followed up a different line of investigation.

"It is more than probable that this latest outrage lies at the door of this same train-wrecking gang, Mr. Zattell; and so—"

"How could it, though? I thought—"

"The gang was all busied tearing up the track at Grape-vine Gorge, you assume? So a goodly portion of the lawless outfit was, but, not all."

"What reason have you for thinking so?"

"For one thing, the fact that the gang was not found at the Gorge."

"They might have suspected something from the delay in arriving?"

"Well, hardly! Besides, we saw a bright light shoot up from Pilot Knob, over yonder—almost certainly a signal to the wreckers that something had gone wrong with their nefarious schemes."

Jaffrey Zattell made a fiercely impatient gesture as he broke forth anew:

"Why is such a lawless gang permitted to ply their devilish arts? What do we pay you detectives for, anyway, sir?"

"Not for all we do and risk, sir, and that's the truth with the bark on," boldly retorted McPherson. "You sit at your ease at home, or sail over the lines in your little palaces on wheels, never giving a thought to the devils who do ten-fold work one-tenth wages!"

"What? What?"

"Just that, sir, and devil a bit less! I've risked my life time and time over this very night to keep this train from pitching down to perdition with all on board! And for what? For the miserable wages I receive when pay-day rolls 'round? Don't you begin to think it, sir!"

"I risked my life to-night, just as I expect to risk it again and again, because 'tis my duty, for one thing; because I'm trying to play even with a reckless devil whom I hate worse than Satan loathes holy water!"

Like the rolling of an impetuous flood came these words; but then, a sudden and complete change came over the detective, and he added, half-apologetically:

"But, that's all right, Mr. Zattell, and now we'll get back to solid business once more."

"I don't—I never once thought—"

"Don't bother about trying it on now, then, sir. One word: were you robbed as well as assaulted, Mr. Zattell?"

"Really, I never gave that a thought until now!" hastily admitted the railroad magnate, slipping hand into pocket while adding: "There's a safe in the car, which—"

"Let's have a look at it, first, then," bluntly cut in the detective, as he strode swiftly to the rear end of the coach in which the lights were still burning dimly.

Mr. Zattell followed close upon the detective's heels, and when McPherson turned up one of the lamps for a better light, the capitalist pointed toward a certain portion of the car, only to utter a sharp exclamation the next instant.

"Gone! The rascals have carried off the strong-box!"

That was self-evident, and feeling that here lay a possible clue, the detective quickly questioned Mr. Zattell concerning the missing box—for such it proved to be, rather than a regulation safe.

Yes, there had been a goodly amount of money in the box, mainly banking notes, with a smaller supply of coin for greater convenience in making change; but by far the most valuable portion of its contents consisted of papers, though hardly negotiable by other hands than Zattell's himself.

"Nothing to hitch a positive clue upon, then?" asked McPherson, disappointed far more than he permitted to show on the surface. "No marked notes? No peculiarities about the bills or coins? For, of course, you never thought of taking the numbers of the bills?"

Zattell shook his head, but then brightening up once more as his hands fumbled in his pockets.

"Wait! I surely had—yes, I did have a marked twenty-dollar bit in my pocket, and it's gone—those hounds surely went through my clothes after knocking me senseless!"

"A marked coin? Describe it, please."

"Well, that's easy enough. A double-eagle, made of California gold; it looks so much like brass, you know?"

"Yes; go on, please!"

"That first made me look at the coin more closely. I noticed the date, and the mint-mark: 1854, small letters. That means 'twas struck at San Francisco, in that year, you understand?"

"Of course. What else, please?"

"On the reverse side was sharply stamped the three letters: 'P. D. Q.' That made me

laugh, for you know the slang those letters represent?"

"Yes. And this coin was taken from you to-night?"

"It surely must have been taken, for my pockets are empty, and just before the Express was halted here, I know money was in my pockets. Do you really think, sir, that this clue is a valuable one?"

"It is worth bearing in mind, at all events," was the non-committal reply; then came the swift addition: "But you can give a far better one if you will, I believe, Mr. Zattell!"

"I don't— What do you mean, sir?"

"That you surely have good reason to think this assault and double abduction was the work of a private enemy, rather than an ordinary gang of ruffians playing for a desperate stake," distinctly enunciated the Telegraph Detective, keeping keen watch upon that paling face and slightly shrinking figure.

He believed his shot struck center, and quickly added:

"I sincerely hope 'twas all done for the sole purpose of extorting a heavy ransom from you, Mr. Zattell; I do hope so, for your sake!"

"I don't— What do you mean by that, Mr. McPherson?"

"Because then the lives of your children are safe. Such goods are far too valuable to lightly risk, even by such villains. But, if done for pure spite, or to play even for some real or fancied injury, that's far different; worse luck, too!"

Jaffrey Zattell shook his head positively, then turned abruptly away, leaving the Telegraph Detective smiling faintly after him, murmuring:

"He's holding something back, but what? and why? If this springs out of an old grudge, how could it be worked off out here so smoothly?"

CHAPTER VI.

FLASHY FRED CUTS A SPLURGE.

MINERAL POINT was a lively burgh for its dimensions, although it lay nearly a score miles off the line of railroad to the north, almost double that distance by the stage road from Silver Leaf.

"Pay dirt" in goodly quantities had been struck at and hard by the location on which the towed quickly sprung into existence, and while many of the enterprising citizen still predicted a branch-road from the main line to their growing metropolis, others both scoffed at and scouted the idea.

Mineral Point was good enough as she stood, and only fools would bow head or crook knee to win a doubtful favor from the railway sharks!

Among other points of public interest surely must be mentioned a combination drinking and gaming-saloon, presided over by one Moses Meek, whose patronymic had been shifted by some whimsical wag, until "the first shall be last," and few in Mineral Point but spoke of or to the proprietor as "Meek-as-Moses."

To a stranger, or to a casual observer, this title might have seemed peculiarly appropriate, but those who were better acquainted with Moses could have told a far different tale.

Quiet, reserved, slow-moving, almost sluggish under ordinary circumstances, Moses Meek was a man from center to circumference whenever the need arose; and then he was a veritable cyclone on ten wheels!

Just now—mid-evening, twenty-four hours later than the attempted train-wrecking at Grape-vine Gorge—the saloon-keeper looked grave enough, even troubled, as his homely face bent over the bar which he was industriously polishing with a damp cloth the while.

The saloon was fairly well filled with customers, for the most part seated at the round tables always to be found in such places, playing short-cards, the majority taking their drinks where they sat, to save both time and trouble.

Near the bar stood a tall, rather slouchy and slouching fellow, his battered-felt hat drawn low over his brows, a dirty cloth bandaging his jaw, a dingy green shade covering his left eye; the picture of disre-

putable shiftlessness as he slowly sipped his glass of liquor.

Under cover of his polishing process Meek-as-Moses muttered:

"I wish you didn't, pardner! I clean wish't ye'd rack out o' this in a holy hurry: so I just do, now!"

"What's biting you now, Moses?" asked the other, in similar tones.

"You know, blame it, man! Jest now there's a lull, but if you'd a' bin here an hour ago—Git out! Cussin's no name for it, Mac!"

"Is that so?"

"That's so! And it'll be shooting instead of cussing if you're still here when Flashy Fred comes back!"

"He is coming back, then?"

"Sure to, worse luck!"

"Well, I don't know another fellow drawing breath this night I'd rather see than Frederick Hibbert!" declared the partially-disguised detective, eyes flashing vividly under that slouched leaf. "What made him jump the game so early, Moses?"

"He hasn't jumped it; you can see 'em holding their hands, waiting for Flashy to come back. Oversized his pile, and he's out rustling for a bigger stake. I've got his hand, right here, to keep safely for him."

Just then hasty footfalls were heard without the door, and with a swift eye flash that way, the disguised detective muttered quietly:

"Speak of the devil—here he is, now! Never mind me; I'll hoe my own row, pardner."

There was time for no further exchange of whispers, for a big, gaily trigged-out shape filled the open doorway, then strode across the room to one of the card-tables where only three men were seated, giving a canvas bag a flourish before thumping it down in front of the vacant seat reserved for his occupancy.

"There you see it, gentlemen!" he cried, in a sonorous voice to match his shape.

"Chuck full of the pretty yellow lads, rebedded in paper with figures big enough to wmake your eyes bung out a foot!"

"Talk's cheaper than good whisky, Flashy!"

"Not my style of chin-music, Nosey, for sh'what I say I back up with the solid rocks. It—like this!"

Dropping into a chair, Flashy Fred, as the big fellow was locally known, snapped off the cord encircling the mouth of the sack, then dumped forth the contents, laughing loudly at the cries and exclamations of admiration and covetous longing which burst almost involuntarily from the spectators near by as well as the opposing gamblers.

Even Nosey made an instinctive move across the table, only to jerk his curving fingers back as swiftly, for Flashy Fred whipped forth a heavy revolver, tapping that fat hand in sharp warning.

"Don't try to burn your fingers, Nosey! It's all yours if you can win it on the level, but—Hello! Where's my hand?"

"I've got it, sealed up, just as you left it, Mr. Hibbert," quickly spoke up the homely-looking proprietor, coming forward with a blank envelope before the half-drunken gambler could vacate his seat.

The disguised detective smiled faintly at this friendly precaution, for such he knew it was.

Fearing a recognition and a certain collision between the two men, Moses was doing all he knew how to avert that catastrophe.

Alick McPherson—for he it was—never even glanced that way, but his ears were doing double service, and he could follow each slight change in the game almost as certainly as though eyes were serving him as well.

Flashy Fred bluffly thanked Moses, then ordered drinks all round.

"Nosey and the lads will be better able to swallow their disappointment, you understand?" he jestingly added.

"Money talks, and ours is up," gruffly spoke the bloated gambler, his prominent nose glowing still more nearly purple if that might be. "Empty wind can't pass current with us, Flashy."

"Empty wind is good—deucedly good, Nosey! Now, how like you the sound, my

coveys?" boisterously cried the big sport, deftly counting out a handful of double-eagles, then letting them fall one on top of another in the center of the table.

Alick McPherson turned at that chain of mellow, metallic chinks, satisfied that, for the time being, Frederick Hibbert was too deeply engaged in betting on his hand at poker to give thought or glance his way.

It was a vision upon which he had often gazed, yet never without a certain degree of admiration for the physical perfection there displayed, bitterly as he hated and scorned the gambler giant.

Tall, broad shouldered, erect and supple as a pine tree, the very model of a modern Hercules was this same Flashy Fred.

His hair was yellow as cornsilk and fully as fine, falling down his shoulders and blending with his luxuriant beard of the same golden hue.

His facial features were strong yet clear-cut and regular, his eyes large and blue as the unclouded sky at midsummer.

A finely ruffled and embroidered shirt; a sack coat and trousers of fawn corduroy, with a soft felt hat of the same shade. And with a well-laden belt of arms clasping his waist, the description is complete enough to serve all purposes.

The heavy betting was sufficient proof that some unusually strong hands had fallen to the share of the gamblers, but of the quartette Flashy Fred showed the greatest confidence, raising the pot as often as the chance came his way, laughing in fierce scorn when even Nosey was forced to cry a halt.

"Give us a sight for our good money, Flash!" he demanded, surlily.

"I'd ought to freeze you all out, or serve you as you treated me: send you on a prospect for more scads!" jeered the Hercules, toying with his cards for a brief space; then quickly adding:

"But, I was born white, and white I'll remain, even in such company as this! So, strain your peepers, gallant gentlemen!"

With a deft movement Flashy Fred strung his hand, revealing four kings and an ace; an invincible hand, since straight flushes were barred.

A brief silence, then cards were hurled aside amid savage oaths and surly grunts of bitter disappointment, all save Nosey rising to their feet, evidently out of the game for that night at least.

"Good, isn't it, Nosey?" mocked the wilderness Hercules, hand quivering above the pot of money for an instant before descending to take full possession.

"Of course it's good, only—well, better luck us next time!"

"That's white—clean white!" declared Hibbert, sweeping the money into the canvas sack, the overflow vanishing into his capacious pockets. "Then you've got a polite sufficiency, gents, all?"

"More than enough, too!"

"All right; we'll meet over the papers later on! Now I'm shouting, lads! Set 'em up, Meek-as-Moses! For the crowd, with your Modesty thrown in as make-weight! Here's your chink, old man!"

Flashy Fred tossed a couple of golden coins upon the bar, one of which ran in a little curve to settle down exactly in front of McPherson.

He instinctively glanced at the double-eagle, then caught his breath sharply, for it looked strangely brassy, and the date was—1854!

Swiftly as thought the detective put hand upon the coin, deftly turning it over even as he slowly pushed it back; and there, distinctly cut or stamped in the yellow metal he read the three letters: "P. D. Q."

Naturally though all this action was taken, it caught the roving eye of the big gambler, and facing that way he gruffly cried out:

"Hellow, stranger! Don't you burn your fingers, now!"

McPherson nodded curtly, mumbling something about shoving the money off the bar; but Flashy Fred caught a quarrelsome streak all at once, and brutally retorted:

"Trying to swipe a sleeper, were ye, eh? Who in blazes are you, anyway? Show us your lovely mug or—"

"Oh, he's all right, Mr. Hibbert!" hastily assured Meek-as-Moses; but his well meant assistance came too late to avert an explosion.

McPherson would not run away, and as he looked up, he was recognized by the giant gambler, who gave a savage roar as he reached for his throat with his left hand, jerking forth a revolver as he cried aloud:

"Alick McPherson! Now I will kill you, bound!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE SCORES A KNOCK-OUT.

THERE was a truly murderous look in those big blue eyes, and as that savage roar burst forth, an almost ludicrous scattering took place among the other patrons of the Bulrushes, some making a mad break for the open door, others crowding into corners, while several even tried to find refuge on the inner side of the bar.

But, just as the bloodthirsty Hercules had eyes and thoughts only for the disguised detective, so Alick McPherson gave his whole attention to Flashy Fred. Evading that deadly grip by a deft swing of his head, he caught the coming member by the wrist, giving it a powerful jerk which destroyed the big fellow's balance and turned him partially around.

Swift as thought itself came the sequel.

In a quarter-circle swung the right arm of the Telegraph Detective, hard-clinched fist striking true to aim, the full force of his "pivot blow" taking effect on the point of the jaw, adding one more to the long list of "knock-out blows."

For, big as he was, Flashy Fred was lifted fairly off his feet and sent headlong into the middle of that sanded floor, falling like a sack of packed sand, literally without sense or motion save the impetus lent his carcass by that tremendous stroke.

It was the chance of a lifetime, and right well did the detective improve the opening.

Even as the pivot blow landed, McPherson sprung swiftly to one side, with back against the bar, a brace of revolvers showing in hands like a rare bit of legerdemain, their grim muzzles sweeping from side to side in perfect keeping with the stern warning which burst from his lips.

"Steady, all! Play white, or somebody's going to get hurt—for keeps! Who's hungry for what that big brute left behind him? Don't speak all at once, but when you do speak, look for trouble in a holy hurry!"

Sundry exclamations of amazement broke from the crowd, hardly able to understand what had taken place before their very eyes.

Flashy Fred bore the well-earned reputation of being a "mighty chief," yet here he lay, quivering like an ox fallen beneath the butcher's poll-ax, laid out by a stroke which both looked and sounded more like an open-handed slap in the face than aught really serious.

Quickly lifting an elbow to rub off his bandage and push away the eye-shade, thus leaving his strongly handsome face wholly without disguise, Alick McPherson added, sharply:

"Who comes next? Don't keep the hearse waiting if you really mean to add to the mourners, gentlemen! Here I am, fat, ragged and saucy! Come and see me before my nerves give way—like they did when Flashy Fred bit off heap-right more than he could chew!"

"Stop! Don't—You can't make any row in the Bulrushes, gents!" cried Meek-as-Moses, rallying from his brief stupor and reaching back for the business-like Winchester standing at the further end of the bar. "If you must fight—"

McPherson gave a short, metallic laugh at that, followed by a sneer:

"Bah. Don't you worry, barkeep! There isn't enough fight left in this blessed outfit to break even your teentiest rule or regulation! And I'm mighty glad of it, too!"

For all that, Telegraph Alick never for an instant relaxed his vigilance, keeping his guns slowly swinging from right to left and back again, dark eyes blazing, and darker mustaches curling back far enough to give a passing glimpse of his strong white teeth.

He recognized a number of those present, and knew that they only lacked a fitting

leader to spring, wolf-like, at his throat, hungry for his life-blood, now that they surely recognized the daring Telegraph Detective.

He believed that at least a portion of the train-wrecking gang was then under the muzzles of his guns, just as he felt morally certain that Frederick Hibbert was the head and master-spirit of that lawless aggregation.

But, that was neither time nor place for forcing such an unequal conflict; and now that he had in goodly measure punished his especial enemy, Alick McPherson began to think of getting out of this scrape with as little loss as might be.

So far he held the drop, and with it a vast advantage.

If a rush was made to avenge the overthrown Hercules, one and all knew that those taking the initiative must pay the severest penalty: at least two, maybe four, would surely go down in death before those revolvers ere so much as a single blow or shot could be aimed at the bold detective.

This is the secret of immunity enjoyed by such a "chief," and no man living better understood the situation than did Aleck McPherson, himself.

"All right, gentlemen; I'm not trying to crowd you into a fight where even the winners must come out losers," he said, in more placable tones, yet keeping his ready guns in motion so deftly that each one of those present, if put on oath, would have sworn he alone had been singled out as an especial target by this reckless fellow!

"Flashy Fred tried to put out my light, and I put him to sleep. If he wakes up to-night, just tell him how he came so, and add that I've got dead-loads of the same sort of medicine left in stock for just such wind-bags as himself!

"Or, if he pretends to play white, say that Aleck McPherson laid him out, and that he stands ready to meet and grant him satisfaction in any way, shape or form, at any time, place or manner. Until then—ta-ta, my dear friends!"

So speaking, the Telegraph Detective backed away from the bar and out through the front door, still holding guns to the front and facing his still bewildered enemies.

He saw Meek-as-Moses bustling forward with repeater to cover his masterly retreat, and feeling assured of one healthy well-wisher, McPherson sprang lightly back over the threshold, swiftly turning down the street, then dodging with cat-like activity around the corner of the Bulrushes.

He felt that just as soon as they could rally from their half-stupor, a portion at least of that company would attempt to follow him, if only through pure curiosity.

By taking this unexpected line, then, the shrewd detective hoped to not only throw the fellows off scent, but to accomplish an even more important object of his own.

The rear of the Bulrushes was cast into dense shadow, comparatively clear though the star studded and moonlighted sky was; and flattening himself against a narrow door which had served him in good stead more than once of late, the Telegraph Detective gave a measured signal which Meek-as-Moses would find no difficulty in rightly interpreting, should that guarded sound meet his watchful ears.

"He'll be on the lookout; surely he must have read my glance aright, in yonder?" muttered McPherson, while waiting, making ears serve for all other senses, just then.

A grim smile curled his red lip as he caught significant sounds coming from the front of the Bulrushes.

"Yelping and snarling on the scent, eh? Well, you took precious good care not to crowd the mourners too hardly, anyway, gentlemen!"

He heard the men passing up and down the street, with plenty of loud talk and louder boasting; but, feeling little uneasiness on that score, McPherson at brief intervals repeated his signal-tapping, feeling sure that, sooner or later, Moses Meek would catch on.

And so it proved, for presently a similar tapping came from inside; then the door swung noiselessly open, and a whisper came to the detective.

"It's you, Mac?"

"That's what's the matter, Moses! Let me in, please!"

"Steady, then! Most of the guys have racked out like they really wanted to eat you up, old man, but—"

"Never mind them, pardner, for I've got something of greater importance to chin about. That yellow-boy Flashy Fred tossed you—you've got it safe, Moses?"

"That's the way I read your look, Mac, and—right here she am! If you want it for any reason—"

"Good enough! I want you to freeze fast to that, Meek, and guard it like the apple of your eye! You can swear Fred Hibbert paid it over your counter this night, Moses?"

"On a haystack of Bibles, yes!"

"Better yet! Now—listen, pardner:

"I want you to fix things so not only yourself, but other solid witnesses can make oath to the facts concerning this double-eagle. I saw two reputable men in yonder: James Morris, and Hendrick Bergundthal. Get them to identify the coin; speak of the three letters you'll find on the side opposite the date; show them that Flashy Fred paid it to you, over the bar, for drinks this very night.

"Will you do all this for me pardner?"

"Like a mice, Mac. Why wouldn't I, then?"

"And that without asking a single question?"

"You'll tell me if there's anything I ought to know, Mac."

Detective Alick grasped those honest hands, pressing them warmly.

"You're white—clean white, Moses! I'll play you even some o' these days, but for now—just this much.

"I've known a slighter bit of evidence to jerk a man up to the gallows-post! And, if not quite a hanging affair, that same bit of marked gold shall put Flashy Fred where the dogs can't bite him for one long while!"

"Good luck go your way, Mac, but don't crowd it too close. Flashy Fred will have it in for you, after this night, bigger'n a mountain! And he's got nasty backers, too, don't you forget it!"

Alick McPherson gave a brief, subdued chuckle at this warning.

"He can't have it in for me worse than he has for a month past, Moses. Never mind putting it into words, even if you can guess it, though, old fellow!"

"It don't call for much guessing, Mac."

"That's all right, too; but now to business. You know just the point I wish to make, of course?"

"I think so, yes. I'm to have at least two solid citizens able to swear that Fred Hibbert paid me a twenty-dollar piece this night, over the bar, marked with three letters opposite the date and mint-mark?"

"Three letters: 'P. D. Q.' Get your witnesses, but don't let them see just why you're stringing 'em, Moses."

"All right. I'll pick out Morris and Bergundthal. They're both of 'em good as old wheat, and their words go far as any man's bond. And now, Mac, don't take too mighty many chances, old fellow! Flashy Fred run a terribly pizen gang, and if you give him a half-chance to play even—"

"I'll be shrewd as a serpent, if not quite as harmless as a sucking dove, pardner," cut in the detective, with another subdued chuckle as he cautiously stepped nearer the exit. "I'll bother—Steady, bo!"

For just then a row broke forth in the saloon proper, and high over the other racket rose the voice of Flashy Fred, cursing and threatening, savagely calling for the devil who took him foul a bit ago!

"You're wanted in yonder, Moses!" added McPherson, after a brief listening. "Go calm that hulking brute if you know how, and—"

"I'll keep him in play until you've time to light out, Mac!"

"Good enough! I'd rather hang than shoot the big rascal, and that bit of minted dust from California will come mighty nigh twisting the rope for that bull-neck, too! Now, cast oil upon the troubled waters, Moses, and don't forget! Leave enough of the big devil for my hanging!"

Slipping through the opened door, Alick McPherson moved swiftly and silently away through those shadows toward the nearest

cover, there pausing for a brief space to listen, then moving onward as he muttered:

"Now, if I could only contrive to see Cora—God bless her!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S CHARMING ALLY.

A NEW day had fairly dawned upon the earth, calm and beautiful, the golden rays just tipping the higher points of rocks and setting the birds to singing joyously throughout the woods.

Alick McPherson lay at full length under a scrubby little cedar tree, his head and face still further masked by a bunch of half-dry grass which grew just at the edge of those stiff boughs.

Through and from under this snug cover the Telegraph Detective was peering, eyes riveted upon a rudely-constructed cabin of logs and stones in about equal proportions, which stood near the base of a rocky height, across the gentle depression through which a tiny brook meandered.

A quaint mountain home it seemed, fit abiding place for some lonely hermit or outlawed criminal to whom all society was distasteful or detested; yet those dark eyes surely lacked the stern, eager glow and glitter appropriate to a hunter of human game.

Far from it; eager enough the eyes, but 'twas with the fire of love and impatient longing rather than aught more dangerous!

McPherson drew back his head far enough to take note of the bit of red cedar which he had fastened across the topmost bough of his tree-covert, its dead, rusty hue forming a sufficiently strong contrast with the dull yet living green of the tree itself.

"It shows plainly enough, surely!" was his half-sighing decision, as he once more sunk back to his waiting and watching. "The little darling surely ought to see it, unless—If those devils have cut up rusty again!"

Viciously came the words, and for an instant those dark eyes caught a red glow from which even a desperate man might well have shrunk; but only for a few seconds; then the love-light took its place and that stern visage fairly glowed with eager delight.

For through the open doorway of yonder little cabin came a fair and graceful shape bearing a wooden bucket in one hand, as she lightly tripped along toward the spring around yonder gentle curve in the hollow, not far distant from the cabin itself, yet fairly hidden from the view of any person near the mountain shack.

"Cora, my bird! At last—and mighty well worth waiting for, too!" muttered Alick McPherson, drawing back, and pausing barely long enough to remove the unobtrusive yet effectual signal agreed upon between the lovers, for such was the relation held by Cora Ball and the detective.

Quickly stealing back until effectually screened from view of the cabin, McPherson ran swiftly around and down to the spring, there greeting the fair and blushing maiden as she came to the rendezvous.

Never mind the manner of greeting.

Enough that Alick McPherson fairly worshiped Cora Ball, the orphan, and that he would have sacrificed his own life rather than fetch one faint flush of shame or humiliation to those fair cheeks.

Yet, they loved, as only such honest, faithful hearts can love.

For a few moments thus, then the maiden drew back far enough to gaze fondly yet timidly into those love-lit eyes, murmuring:

"Oh, Alick! how glad I was when I first saw your little signal this morning! I thought I would die, of pure happiness, Alick!"

"That's worth a—Two of them, little lady!" laughingly murmured the detective, suiting actions to words with lover-like audacity.

For once his ardent caress was returned in kind, and then tears dimmed those lustrous eyes, and clinging closer to his broad breast, her face half hidden there, Cora murmured, brokenly:

"They told me—they said you were—dead, Alick!"

"Who told you that, pet?" swiftly asked the detective, his professional instincts wakening once more.

"Uncle Nathan, first, though he afterward tried to cover it over, as though he felt he had made an awful slip of the tongue."

"He said that, eh? When, pet?"

"Yesterday, when something I did or said angered him. He said— Oh, it was terrible, Alick!"

"Not half so dreadful as if truth, though, little lady," with a low, careless laugh, calculated to reassure the trembling maiden.

"Uncle Nat, eh? And the beautiful twins, your cousins, Cora?"

"Worse—far worse!" with a renewed shudder. "You know pretty much what they are, Alick?"

"Curs, both Silas and Luke!" flashed the detective, his brows gathering darkly.

"Fit cubs from such an old beast as Nathan Pollock, those same twins! I can't for the life of me make it out reasonable that you are any blood-kin to such worthless knaves, precious!"

Cora smiled faintly through her tears as she looked up to meet that ardent gaze. Alick promptly kissed away her tears, and nestling a tiny bit closer to him, the orphan girl spoke on:

"They say I take after my father, even more than my poor, dear mother, Alick; and she was an angel, even while on earth!"

"She surely must have been, and I thank her each and every night for leaving such a charming representative here on earth for me, pet?"

"For you—all for you, Alick, my king!"

Only the preternaturally keen ears of a true lover could have caught the meaning of that low murmur. But Alick not only heard; he paid off the score in lovely coin at once! Too much kissing?

Well, life is not all made up of tragedy, and Jove himself was known to unbend at odd times. Besides, there needs a stray bit of sunshine to relieve the somberness of a record like this, kind reader.

Knowing as he did how uncertain was this lease of bliss, since at any moment a harsh summons might come from yonder cabin, couched in the voice of her uncle or one of the un-heavenly twins, Silas or Luke Pollock, Alick cut those lovely perquisites shorter by far than would have been done had he full leeway.

There was business as well as pleasure connected with this sudden trip into the mountains, and with the clew already given by Cora, it did not take very long to get at the bottom facts of the case.

Uncle Nathan, as well as the twins, had been absent from home throughout the misty night on which the attempt to wreck the Lightning Express was made.

The three men, worn and haggard, showing traces of long and hard tramping, if not still worse, came home just at crack of dawn, viciously enraged about something; just what, Cora failed to discover for some hours.

But then, in a fit of dangerous rage against the child of his dead sister, Nathan Pollock burst out into a storm of curses against all such, and then dealt the orphan a brutal blow—not physical, so much as mental.

"He swore that you were dead—drowned and shot, both!" huskily whispered the still agitated maiden. "And then, later on, all through the day, either Silas or Luke kept taunting me—like that!"

"For all of which I'll take grim pleasure in choking them—with a good hempen noose!"

"My fears were well founded, Alick?"

"If you feared they had been playing part in train-wrecking, yes, little lady. If they failed to hurl scores of innocent souls from life to eternity, all in one horrible instant, 'twas through no fault of theirs, Cora! And only for you— Just think of it, darling!"

"I can't—I don't wish to even think of it, Alick!" murmured the maiden, voice growing faint and uncertain as she once more hid her face upon that broad bosom.

"And I just glory in it, my heroine!" declared the detective, pressing the shivering form closer and closer. "Only for you—only for the warning word you let fall, my precious! And, when the right day dawns, Cora, the whole world shall know what we

two alone know now: that but for your brave shrewdness, scores of now happy homes would have been turned to despairing grief! Only for you, my angel!"

"Don't—please don't, Alick, dearest!" murmured the maiden; and as the surest method of cutting short his praises, Cora raised on tiptoe to touch his lips with hers!

It was hard, very hard to deny himself more, but time was passing all too rapidly, and there yet remained much to ask, much to hear, as Alick fondly hoped.

Casting all else behind him, then, for the moment, McPherson asked his charming ally if she had heard uncle or cousins talking about any prisoners, or captives.

Even before her lips could shape the answer, the detective knew his hopes in that direction were coming to naught; Cora had not caught any such allusions, whatever.

In answer to her surprised looks, the detective briefly but clearly narrated the strange affair at Silver Leaf, giving at least a portion of his reasons for thinking the double abduction had been engineered by a part of the evil gang under guidance of Flashy Fred, the Giant.

"If it is as I firmly believe, so far, Cora, you'll be mighty apt to hear something about it, if you keep all ears open. You won't mind that, pet, to help me on a bit?"

"You know I'll do all that lies in my power, Alick. If uncle or the twins know anything at all concerning this affair, I believe I can find out the truth of it."

"You're an angel, little woman!" enthusiastically declared the detective, setting seal upon those red ripe lips once more.

"If you can find out anything through those hulking brutes, do so, and make the old signal: 'I'll be sure to see it, sooner or later'."

"Unless— Oh, Alick! I'm afraid—so deathly afraid whenever I think of your running such terrible risks! If you were only safely out of this business, and—"

"After we are married, my precious!" whispered the detective. "And Heaven grant that joyous hour may come 'round right soon, say I!"

Instead of joining in his ardor, Cora shrunk away, shivering anew.

"Why, what's the matter, pet? Surely the thought is not so dreadful as to scare you like this?" whispered the love-lorn detective.

"Not that, Alick, only— Never mind, dear. I pray you!"

"What! those devils have been at you again, Cora?" demanded McPherson, his brows contracting and his eyes beginning to flash hot fire.

"Yes," faintly admitted the maiden, head bowed. The twins are the worst, but uncle is bad enough, goodness knows! He says—they all swear that I've dilly-dallied too long, already, and that I must marry— Oh, how I do hate that Fred Hibbert!"

"Marry that over-grown curse? I'll wipe out the whole evil gang, rather!" sternly vowed the detective, tightening his embrace, then adding swiftly: "Come with me, Cora! Come with me, and we'll jump the whole infernal country! What's all the rest, compared with you, my angel?"

Instead of yielding, Cora drew back a bit further, saying quickly:

"No, Alick, though that would be like heaven in comparison with the sort of life I'm living now with these wicked people! For—you surely haven't completed the work you begun out here, Alick?"

"No, but—let all the rest drop rather than leave you in the clutches of such ugly devils, Cora! Come, and I'll make you my wife before this sun sets, to-night!"

The maiden deftly escaped his eager grasp, speaking swiftly:

"No; duty comes first, Alick, dear! I'll wait—I'll hope on for the best until your work here is accomplished; then— Hark!"

A harsh voice came from the mountain shack, demanding what in—not heaven—Cora was doing so long at the spring?

"It's uncle! Good-by, my darling, my king!" brokenly said the maiden, giving her lover one passionate kiss, then snatching up her brimming bucket of water and hurrying away toward the cabin.

"Watch for my signal, and I'll watch for

yours, darling!" cried the detective after his love; then he stole far enough forward to win a partial view of cabin and trio of hulking inmates, fingering his guns nervously as he muttered barely above his breath:

"For little I'd carry her off in your teeth, devils! And I'll do just that inside of a week, too: I swear it on your worthless lives!"

CHAPTER IX.

A BRIEF LESSON IN BOXING.

WHEN Cora Ball vanished from his sight, entering the mountain shack to complete preparations for the morning meal, Alick McPherson turned away with a sigh of reluctance.

When once fairly beyond eye-range of the cabin, his steps quickened and he pressed rapidly along, evidently with a certain destination in view.

He had food for thought sufficient to keep half a dozen brains busy, just then, and many were the changes which passed over his speaking countenance while the detective was making the best of his way back to Mineral Point.

Enough has been said to fairly well indicate the nature of business which both brought and kept Alick McPherson in that wild region.

For a number of months past, lawlessness along the Union Pacific line had increased to an alarming extent, and several unusually bold outrages had been recorded, two dastardly wrecks ending with loss of life.

A detective in the employ of the road, then, Alick McPherson had come to the vicinity of Silver Leaf and Mineral Point, hoping to ferret out the criminal gang, and in some respects he had been wonderfully favored by fortune.

For instance, he had met and fairly won the heart of Cora Ball, an orphan girl, living with her uncle Nathan Pollock, and her twin cousins, Silas and Luke of the same patronymic.

And the Telegraph Detective's first actual clue to the train-wreckers came to him through that charming agency; while hers was the warning which enabled McPherson to foil the dastardly work at Grape-vine Gorge where he so narrowly missed meeting his death.

Then, too, far less agreeable thoughts troubled the telegraph detective: thoughts of Frederick Hibbert, the Giant Gambler and Sport-in-general, who was so basely persecuting poor Cora, backed up and abetted by her lawless relatives, the Pollocks.

"The dirty cur! I'd break his neck, only for the good of the service! Making Flashy Fred pull hemp or play checkers with his nose would be worth a dozen ordinary killings, so far as these cursed wreckers run!"

With these thoughts, then, interspersed with puzzling over the as yet unexplained assault upon Jaffrey Zattell and the double abduction at Silver Leaf, Alick McPherson found plenty to keep his brain busy, and though the distance was considerable, almost ere he knew it he came out from the wooded hills into fair view of Mineral Point.

From where the Telegraph Detective paused for a few seconds, all looked quiet and peaceful within those confines; but a grim smile curled his shapely lips as he distinguished the dingy roof of the Bulrushes, under which he had so deftly "put to sleep" the Giant Sport.

"He'll try to play even if he sights me, easy enough," grimly muttered the detective, as he resumed his course once more. "Well, I'm hardly ready to take him in out of the wet for good and all; but, he can't ride over me rough-shod: not any, Mr. Hibbert!"

Instead of making direct for the scene of his last night's brief triumph, McPherson headed for the opposite end of the town, where one of the omnipresent "heathen Chinese" had located a laundry in a far from splendid structure; one of the earliest shanties put up on the ground before Mineral Point was fairly named, much less christened.

A very prosaic bit of business brought the detective to the door of the more or less worthy Chough Lee: that door above which still showed the rude, irregular letters paint-

ed there by the too sanguine saloon-keeper so brief a time after the tumultuous birth of this, the latest "new rush" and budding metropolis.

McPherson caught glimpses in passing of several slouching shapes either up or down the dusty streets, but none of them were recognizable as Flashy Fred or that gentleman's immediate followers, and hardly giving a second thought to probable trouble, the detective crossed that threshold to secure his latest invoice of clean linen.

So much could with safety be said concerning Chough Lee: he was always on time with his work, and this was not one of the rare exceptions which go to prove the rule.

McPherson paid his bill, secured his little bundle, then turned to take his departure: only to find his exit blocked by a burly fellow, whose flushed face, blood-streaked eyes and general savor told of strong potations if not of deep and lasting ones.

Recognition was immediate, and a hard glitter came into the dark eyes of the Telegraph Detective, for he knew as if by instinct that trouble was in the air.

"Stiddy, thar, critter!" gruffly exploded the ruffian. "Don't ye dast fer to try to run chuck-up over a heap-sight better man than ever ye dar' be, McFusticuss!"

"There's room enough for both, Billy McCoupin," coldly answered the detective, shifting his bundle to leave his good right arm free. "I'm not seeking trouble with the likes of you, now, and—"

"You're mighty right ye hain't, now!" insolently interrupted the tough, sending a sneering laugh back toward the fellows who had flocked to the spot pretty much as vultures hasten to the carrion feast. "I know ye from A to Ampersand, 'Lick McSawney, I do! You kin paste a gent what's full to the neck with jig-water, an' when he hain't lookin' your way fer no sech; but you cain't even begin fer to do it that way to a white man in his open senses; no ye cain't, now!"

"I hardly comprehend your meaning, Mr. McCoupin."

"It's easy to cain't by them as don't want, eh, mates? An' you, critter, jest take this fer a stan'-by to chaw on; you could knock down Fred Hibbert when he was drunk an' off his guard, but you cain't even begin fer to tetch me that-a-way—no ye cain't, now, fer rocks! I kin lick ary lyin', fawnin', scratchin', nose snoopin', flea-breedin' Scotch pup as was ever whelped by a—"

So far, but no further!

Dropping his bundle, Alick McPherson let fly both hands, fingers straight and palms open; only a double slap, but so vigorously delivered as to send the burly ruffian staggering back, blinded for the moment, and feeling as though his skull had suddenly caved in!

"Steady, all!" sternly warned the Telegraph Detective the instant he dealt that double stroke, swiftly snatching forth a brace of revolvers from their scabbards the while. "I'm not hunting a row, gentlemen, but if any brute steps on my toes, he's got to get off in a hurry!"

A hoarse, savage howl and curse combined burst from the lungs of the finger-marked bully; but his rush was instantly checked by one of those business-like muzzles, backed up by the stern speech:

"Steady, Bill McCoupin! I'd hate to waste a cartridge on such low-down game, but you've reached your limit so far as I'm concerned. Quiet, I say, or off comes your roof!"

"I kin lick you clean out of—"

"Bah! You couldn't even begin to lick one side of my shadow, and me soundly sleeping!" contemptuously interrupted the detective.

"Putt up yer guns an' I'll show ye how—I dar' ye to putt up yer guns, now!" fairly howled the ruffian, blood streaming from his whisky-colored proboscis from those terrible slaps.

McPherson flashed a keen glance over the little crowd, giving a bit of a nod as he recognized one or two men whom he felt fairly well assured were "on the dead level," and of far different caliber than this roaring, ranting, guzzling disciple of Flashy Fred.

"If you're actually honing for a lesson, Billy! You'll see fair play, gentlemen?"

"That's what we just will, now!"

"All right; a man who'd ask for better is a hog! And so, shed your linen, Billy, for I'm going to let you lick me until you can't tell a glass of whisky from a hole in the ground!"

Slipping off his belt of arms and laying it near the building, McPherson swiftly removed his coat and vest, rolling up his shirt-sleeves in business-like manner, smiling blandly as he took note of the burly ruffian going through with the same motions, cursing, blustering, threatening, all in the same breath.

"Talk comes heap-sight cheaper than whisky, Billy," coolly assured the detective, as he poised himself lightly in position, hands on guard and ready for swift execution. "Have you said your prayers yet, dear lad?"

"I won't leave 'nough o' ye to eyther pray or to cuss, durn ye all over!" savagely cried McCoupin, making a vicious rush as though he counted the victory already won.

Right there was where he found out his mistake!

Spit-spit!

The strokes made fair connection, each set of steel-like knuckles cutting through that puffy flesh and reaching the bone, driving that shaggy pow violently backward, and nearly blinding the ruffian.

A better opening man never had for finishing up the quarrel; but, instead of pressing his opportunity, McPherson stood at ease, laughing in keen mockery at that ludicrous amazement.

Quickly rallying, McCoupin rushed again and again, just as often encountering those pitiless fists, just as often beaten back with fresh cuts in his rapidly swelling face, to hear that tantalizing laugh ringing in his ears above the exclamations of wonder and delight which came like involuntary tributes from the on-lookers.

McPherson played with his man for several minutes, striking him when and where he willed, never so much as a single blow touching his own person; but then, growing weary of such one-sided play, he gave grim warning:

"Steady, now, you clumsy brute! It's like hammering a bag of wool, but you invited the lesson, and so—here's your settler, Billy!"

Throwing the weight of his body into the blow, McPherson lunged forward, striking right and then left, lifting McCoupin fairly off his feet and sending him backward, a thoroughly whipped tough.

Standing at ease, the Telegraph Detective watched his fallen adversary, who presently showed signs of rallying; and slowly, painfully lifting himself to a sitting posture, the bruised bully stared dazedly around.

Then—a sharp report was heard, and throwing up his arms convulsively, Alick McPherson pitched forward on his face, like a corpse!

CHAPTER X.

THE PRICE OF A HUMAN LIFE.

THE Pollocks, father and twin sons, were in anything but an angelic humor that fair morning; but Cora Ball paid them as little attention as possible when she hurried back from the spring with her bucket of fresh water.

Past experience warned her against making answer to those coarse taunts, or coarser curses, and the wary maiden kept lips tight-locked while completing the preparation of the morning meal.

That trio was neither good to look at nor pleasant to hear.

Never overburdened with politeness or affability, of late days the men seemed in a state of chronic discontent, which had at least doubled itself since the fiasco at Grapevine Gorge.

Although she could present no legal evidence to that effect, Cora felt morally certain that her uncle and her cousins had some close connection with the epidemic of lawlessness which had broken forth along that particular section of the Union Pacific.

Plentifully gifted with animal cunning

and native shrewdness, Nathan Pollock and his gangling cubs had so far managed to keep the maiden in the dark as to their actual plans, so far as law-breaking was concerned; yet Cora knew they were deep in the confidence of Frederick Hibbert, who certainly took part in the train-wrecking, both successful and abortive.

Ostensibly the three mountaineers made their living by shooting game and catching fish, disposing of the surplus at Mineral Point or at the stations along the line of railway beyond.

Then, too, 'twas hinted that the Pollocks knew of a secret placer where, without too arduous labors or any expensive machinery, they could "clean up" sufficient to eke out their needs—not at all extravagant save in the way of whisky and an occasional bout with short-cards.

Father and sons were purely typical "pikes," such as the lower counties of Missouri alone can produce to perfection: tall, stoop shouldered, gaunt of face and of body, leathery skin and general "aguish" look, thin-lipped and wide mouths, drooping at the corners where a trickle of "ambier" was naturally looked for, and as invariably found!

In only one important respect did sons differ from parent: Nathan Pollock was catlike in his motions, swift to plan and prompt to execute, seemingly a bundle of oil-tempered springs wrapped up in a half-tanned hide.

But the twins, as the younger men were generally termed, were slow and sluggish of movement, none too ready to plan though all the better followers for that lack.

It took time to set them fairly in motion, but when once set going, look out!

So far as she knew, Cora had no other living relatives.

Her mother was a far different manner of being than her saturnine brother, and married a gentleman, in the purest meaning of that much abused title.

Cora was their only child, and both parents died while she was but a girl in short frocks.

By her mother's death-desire, Cora sought out her uncle, and ever since that date had lived beneath his roof, as nearly a slave as her naturally proud spirit could bear, even for relation sake.

A cheerless life enough until fortune brought Alick McPherson her way, since which never-to-be forgotten day Cora felt that at least a share of heaven on earth was to be hers, at last!

Cora was washing up the breakfast dishes, half dreaming of her lover and the still more blissful days to come, when she was startled by a swift footfall, and turned just in time to recognize but not evade Flashy Fred Hibbert.

His great arms were flung around her, drawing her closely to his breast, while his half-mocking, half-triumphant laugh sent a disgusting odor of stale whisky across her paling face.

"A sip of heavenly honey, sweet Two-lips!" cried the giant gambler, as he pressed a hot kiss upon her nearest cheek: her face was averted far enough to keep her red lips undefiled.

"You brute!" panted Cora, struggling to break free, then striking at that bloated face with all her might with both hands. "How dare you—you cowardly cur!"

Only a woman's hands, but for all that the big ruffian staggered back with a savage imprecation, almost involuntarily slackening his grip.

With a twist and a turn Cora broke away, springing back of the kitchen table, where she caught up a long-bladed butcher knife, menacing Hibbert as he showed signs of renewing the assault.

"Why, you little spit-cat! I'll make you pay for that in kisses, long drawn out as a Methodist prayer!"

"Back! Don't you dare touch me again, Fred Hibbert, or I'll— Back, I say!" sharply warned the maiden, face pale as death, but eyes fairly ablaze with indignation and insulted modesty.

Flashy Fred paused, but with 'a short, forced laugh of scorn, through which ran a vein of ruffianly admiration.

"Spunky, by glory! I'd rather kiss you once, Cora, than any other girl a thousand

times. Come, now, put up that pig-sticking machine, and play fair, pretty-by-day! Don't

"Look out, boy!" came the shrill high-pitched voice of Nathan Pollock in hasty warning as Hibbert moved forward once more. "She'll stob ye like a—didn't I done tole ye, man?"

For, as the giant advanced to grasp the maiden, Cora struck straight for his broad bosom with all the power of her arm, and only his instant recoil saved Flashy Fred from death or sore hurt.

As it was, the keen blade slit open his embroidered shirt front, the steel even tasting blood, though the wound was hardly more than skin deep.

"Back, I say, you brute! Lay hand on me again, and I'll kill you like a mad wolf!" cried the brave girl, fairly transfigured for the time being.

Flashy Fred fell back, cursing fiercely; but something in those brown eyes warned him to heed his ways, and with fallen crest the big ruffian beat a retreat.

Nathan Pollock was grave as the sphinx, outwardly, though a veiled twinkle in his deep-sunken eyes told how far he was enjoying the utter discomfiture of this, his overbearing master; but the twins made no effort to disguise their huge delight, grinning all over their faces as Flashy Fred not only beat a retreat, but left the house.

Once outside, freed from those indignant eyes, Hibbert quickly rallied, falling to execrations and fuming, then breaking out into hot and bitter words of reproach.

"Is this the way you keep your part of the bargain, Nathan Pollock? Is this the girl I've already paid you for, time and time over again?"

"W. . . boss, thar's gals an' gals," oracularly quoth the gaunt mountaineer, shifting his quid from one lantern jaw to the other, then firing a liquid shot at a stray humble-bee a half-rod off, knocking the insect over as surely as ever he could have done with his old Kentucky pea-rifle.

"An' Cora's a bu'ster of a gal!" cut in Silas, with a broad grin.

"An' then thar's def'runt ways o' tacklin' a gal, too," deliberately added Pollock, Senior. "Thar's some you've got to slick up an' soothe down like hog-fat an' taller-soppin'; an' then thar's them you kin manidge best by tromplin' all over 'em, rough-shod an' kickin'! But, honest, now, boss, I raally can't say as Cory's jest the sort o' gal—"

"Nor you the sort of guardian to keep her inside the traces!" hotly retorted the giant bad man, with a savage gesture to match his tones. "I give you all the blame, Nat Pollock, for letting that cursed hound, Alick McPherson, come snooping round the premises after Cora!"

"I hain't let him no sech thing! Why do you say that?"

"You certainly haven't hindered him, Pollock! What did I tell you? So long as that devil on ten wheels is alive and above-ground—"

"Stiddy, durn ye!" angrily hissed the mountaineer, finger rising to lip and eyes flashing toward the open door of the cabin. "Cory'll hear ye, an' then—"

Flashy Fred nodded shortly, and without more speech strode away from the cabin, followed by the Pollocks, father and sons.

Not until at what he deemed a safe distance from the shack did Flashy Fred call a halt; then he cut precious little time to waste, speaking rapidly, with a fire which told how intensely in earnest he was just then.

"Time's past for fooling, men, and we've all got to settle down to sober business, or we'll run up a tree—by the neck!"

"First of all, Alick McPherson's got to be put out of the way! You know how he foolshed us at the Gorge; but, that isn't all—nor the half of it!"

"He's contrived to get on the scent of the boss of this kidnapping case, and if let run his loose he'll make dirty trouble for the pile o' us; can't you see that much?"

"Waal, boss, Mac's a p'izen nasty critter to curry down the likes o' that way," gravely acknowledged the elder Pollock.

"That's what he jest is!" chimed in the twins, as a single voice.

"But he's only a man, all told; and if the

pay is big enough to cover everything—ch. Pollock?"

"Who's gwine fer to do the paying, fu'st, boss?"

Hibbert hesitated perceptibly, but, seeming to realize the wisdom of frank speaking, he added:

"Well, mates, we'll call no names for now, but the pay is dead sure and anything at all within reason. For, do ye mind, there's big money to be won by the boss in this kidnapping trick, and he's willing to share it out in great gobs, too! And so—will you undertake to choke that infernal bloodhound off the scent forever, Pollock?"

"That's mighty sight easier sayin' than to do," dryly remarked the mountaineer, twisting off a fresh quid of black navy.

Flashy Fred gave an impatient gesture at this caution.

"It's dead easy, I tell you, man! All you want is a bit of pluck—"

"That's a darlin' bunch you've ketched onto the jaw of ye, boss!" cut in Pollock, eyes twinkling maliciously as he innocently added: "Did a bumbly bee or a bal' ho'net stob ye right thar, Flashy?"

For a moment the giant looked vengeful murder, but crushed back his savage rage, forcing himself to speak with outward calmness.

"I was drunk and off my guard, Pollock; but, let that pass, if you are not all fool. Now, will you put Alick McPherson out of the way, if I pledge you your own figures for the work?"

"Ef you kin show me how to turn the trick 'thout havin' to chaw his lead, or pull a rope 'long of doin' the job: bet yer sweet life!"

"The how is easy enough, thanks to the girl over yonder. McPherson is dead in love with Cora, and through her you can easily enough trap the devil on ten wheels!"

"Waal, thar is somethin' in that, fer a fact!"

"There's everything in it, man! Use the girl as a bait to lure Alick McPherson here; then you three jump him, making sure work and swift. You can do it if you will: will you do it, then?"

"Eh, laids?" drawlingly asked Nathan, looking from one twin to the other, its duplicate both physically and mentally.

"Waal, I reckon mebbe we mought," slowly answered Silas.

"Ef thar's 'nough money fer the work," amended Luke, lazily.

"What do you call a fair price, then?" demanded Flashy Fred.

"Ax pap we're jest deck-hands, whar he's mate, cap'n an' pilot!"

"Out with it, Pollock!" impatiently cried Hibbert. "How much do you ask for throwing that cursed bloodhound off the scent forever?"

"Waal, would five hunderd chucks be ary too big a heap, reckon, boss?"

"Will you do the job for that sum, in hard, clean cash, Pollock?"

"You bet yer sweet life we just will, Flashy!" declared Nathan, and then their hands closed firmly over that murderous compact.

Shortly afterward the quartette moved away, and a pale, agonized face rose up from behind a shrub hard by, hands clasped and raised toward heaven.

Cora Ball stole silently back to the cabin once more!

CHAPTER XI.

THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE'S RUSE.

AT crack of gun or pistol Alick McPherson flung up both arms and pitched forward, striking foot against the half stunned Billy McCoupin, then falling at full length like a man shot through the brain.

A streak of blood showed itself on his face as the detective rolled over, coming from a bullet torn scalp; but McPherson was far from being a corpse, as was right speedily made manifest.

All was wild confusion among the little crowd collected by word or by sound of "the circus," and not a man among them all seemed to know by whom or from whence that dastard shot had been winged.

As the units promptly scattered through instinctive fear of other death-pellets coming

their way, McPherson rolled over to the side of the ex-saloon, now the wash-house, dashing hair and blood from his eyes, rallying with marvelous celerity for one who had received so close a call.

An instant later he reached the little pile of clothes and weapons, giving a short, fierce shout of defiance as he grasped a trusty revolver.

"Now, ye cowardly whelp! Show your face—where's the cur who snapped at a man's heels?"

With these stern words the Telegraph Detective gained his feet and pushed still further to the front, searching for the knave who had so narrowly missed his life; but none of those whom he saw looked or acted like such a foul assassin.

"Where is he? Show me the man who bloodied my head when I wasn't looking?" he cried, fairly wild with rage and thirst for vengeance.

But not one of the witnesses to that brief lesson in boxing seemed capable of placing the detective upon the right scent; one and all avowed their perfect innocence, their complete ignorance.

The sound of firearms added materially to the size of the little crowd, but Alick cared naught for that, just then, but went searching, gun in hand, for the dastard whose lead had fairly "creased" his skull.

He failed to detect aught of a fleeing foe-man, yet reason told him such surely ought to be the case, if the would-be murderer had really betaken himself to flight.

Look where he might, he could see nothing to guide his return shot, and then his suspicions quickly centered upon Chough Lee and the Chinaman's laundry.

McPherson knew several of those present at the time were honest enough, and when they declared their inability to cast more light upon the affair, he had no alternative but to believe them.

They had been too greatly startled to even feel sure from which direction that treacherous shot had come, but McPherson had no difficulty in deciding that point.

Faced as he had been, the bullet striking his skull from the rear, he knew the marksman must have been at the corner of the laundry, and there he once more looked for sign: but vain.

His suspicions narrowed down to that one point, then; and quickly putting on his outer garments, the detective spoke tersely, sharply:

"All eyes open, gentlemen! I'll put up that cur, or bu'st a button! Leave him to me, but give the view halloo if he breaks cover, please!"

Then, gun in hand and face looking unusually pale, through contrast with the blood which trickled down from his lacerated scalp, McPherson forced wide the front door to the laundry, which the yellow heathen had closed, as though in fear for his life.

"Where is he, Chough Lee?" sternly demanded Alick, as he confronted the bowing, cringing, mumbling Chinese. "Where've you stowed him away? Trot him out, you smoky knave, or I'll flog you half to death with your own pigtail!"

"No sabe, how can?"

"You sabe me, I sabe you, all same big lie, Chough Lee!" gruffly retorted the detective, gripping that braided pigtail and swinging the cringing heathen squarely around as on a pivot. "Business, you saffron hued fraud! You took that hound in, and hid him until—show up, Lee, or you'll never see China again this side of monkey-heaven!"

With a muffled howl the son of Confucius collapsed, sinking limply to the floor in a shivering heap, a groaning, wheezy murmur escaping his blanched lips the while.

"You no sabe my, my no sabe you! No can, how do? 'Melica' man go crazy olle time—Chough Lee no sabe, how sabe can?"

With something suspiciously like an oath, McPherson let his limp captive loose, the laundryman falling back until his head struck the rough flooring with an audible bump, then the Chinese lay blinking and winking, forcing a ghostly smile while feebly murmuring:

"You no sabe my, my no sabe you!"

"Let me know if I smoke the rat out of his hole, gents!" called out the Telegraph

Detective, then pressing his search with doubled ardor, his rage against the dastard who "bloodied his face" growing with each passing minute.

The place was by no means large, but there were plenty of nooks and odd-corners, thanks to the ingenious labors of the Chinaman, and through as many of these as he could well contrive, McPherson groped in quest of his as yet unknown assailant, gun in grip, ready to return shot for shot in case he should corner the human rat and force him into a show of teeth.

But his efforts were all in vain, and, half smothered by the sickening fumes which, somehow, seem inseparable from the private quarters of these Orientals, the detective was forced to abandon his search without finding his human quarry.

Still, McPherson felt morally certain the knave must be in hiding some place beneath that very roof, else his flight surely would have been discovered by himself, or some of the company outside.

He found Chough Lee still lying on the floor where let fall, still smiling, still murmuring his little song; and softening his voice far milder than his actual feelings could justify, the detective said:

"I reckon you were right, and I in the wrong, Chough Lee. There's nobody hiding in here, after all, and so—plaster your hurts with this sort of salve, John!"

Tossing the fellow a couple of coins, McPherson passed outside the laundry, stooping to pick up his bundle of clean linen in passing, then speaking coldly to the curious crowd collected near the door:

"I reckon I was mistaken, gentlemen; there's no cur hiding in yonder, and I've paid John for stirring up his duds—and nasty smells! You haven't seen anything of the pretty fellow, I take it?"

A chorus of negations came swiftly, and slowly putting up his pistol, Alick McPherson added:

"He racked out while I took that tumble, I reckon, gentlemen. Well, he may show up again, some time, somewhere. If he should, and any of you spot the fellow, just say this much on my account:

"I'll be at home to him, by night or by day. I'll reserve a greeting for him so warm that he'll need no more fuel this side of Hades! If any of you should see him, beg him to call again, but to play white and rap at my front door, instead of burning powder behind my back!"

"Of one thing he can rest assured: ill be at home to him, let the gentleman call when he may see fit!"

With a short, crisp nod, which included all, the Telegraph Detective turned away, never once glancing back so long as he remained in sight of the spot where he had so narrowly missed his death.

To all seeming, he had given over all hopes of discovering his would-be murderer, but that was far from being the case.

As soon as he felt he was safe from observation from that quarter, McPherson turned sharply from that direct course, passing swiftly along toward the broken ground lying north of the town. There crouching down in cover, from whence he could see without himself being seen, eyes riveted upon the dingy, paintless shanty occupied by Chough Lee as a laundry.

"Ten to one he's in hiding there!" muttered the detective to himself. "Where else could he have vanished so quickly? And Chough Lee is snaky—snaky all over and all through!"

Fully an hour passed by without aught rewarding that close vigil, but Alick McPherson felt fairly well assured he had read the truth; and he was a man-hunter in that one respect: he could wait and watch like a veritable Red Indian, when necessary.

"Who could it have been, anyway? He meant business; but he's a chump, for all that! Hardly a couple of rods away, yet—ugh! It feels nasty enough, but I know the sort of salve to heal it up in a hurry."

McPherson felt of his bullet-torn scalp with a gingerly finger-tip, but almost as quickly forgot the pain thus caused, for, just ajar, he saw the narrow door in the rear of the laundry, then recognized the pig-tailed head of Chough Lee, plainly reconnoitering.

A few seconds later the yellow face grew

dark, the portal opened wider, then a slender, trim shape slipped through the outer air.

McPherson gave a little start, his strong teeth clicking together in grim surprise; for this was hardly the man he anticipated seeing.

"A new-comer; Omaha Kid, I believe he registers as! Now—what's set him on my back? Surely not—the kidnapping case, for rocks!"

Those keen eyes caught a deeper glow for the moment, and as he saw the young fellow move away from the rear of the laundry, McPherson also shifted ground, heading so as to cut off the flight of his suspected assailant, in case Omaha Kid should prematurely detect his approach.

But, for once, fortune favored the Telegraph Detective, for the young fellow headed more directly for the broken ground lying north of town, as though he wished seclusion rather than company whose questions might prove awkward to answer.

Keeping fairly well under cover, the detective hurried along to lie in wait for his game, determined to force a full if not a fair explanation from the Nebraska representative.

Instead of keeping on as he started, Omaha Kid faltered, looked over his shoulder, then fairly turned and walked toward the town instead!

Frowning at his fickleness, McPherson ran swiftly around to still intercept his game, though they were dangerously near witnesses when he at length came close enough to touch his man, slipping hand through arm as he quietly but significantly spoke:

"Come for a quiet little stroll, Kid, or—chew cold lead!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CONFESSION CUT SHORT.

OMAHA KID gave a start and a half-smothered oath when so completely taken by surprise; but McPherson tightened grip on arm, at the same time pushing the muzzle of a cocked revolver squarely against those flinching ribs, speaking crisply:

"Don't be all fool, Kid! You've had your innings, and this is mine. Will you come alive, or must I take you dead?"

"I never—I don't—" stammered the young fellow, clearly unmanned for the time being, so completely was he caught off his guard.

"Then why try lying when only the naked truth can serve your purpose, dear boy?" coolly cut in the Telegraph Detective, moving away from town with his prize, seemingly on the best of terms, yet all the time keeping that silent reminder denting the Kid's ribs.

"You took a snap-shot at me, back yonder—"

"I never—hope may die if I ever, sir!"

"Don't hope for what'll overtake you soon enough, Kid. What I say, I'll prove. But this isn't the smoothest talking, so—button-lip until we can give Mineral Point the actual shake, Kid!"

Cowed to all seeming the man from Nebraska bore his captor company to the hills, and not until they were fairly out of sight of the town did McPherson come to a halt, finally settling down at ease on a patch of grass and half-dry moss under the trees and among the gray rocks.

"Now, Kid, where were you hiding while I turned Chough Lee's shebang upside down a bit ago?"

"I wasn't hiding: why should I be hiding, sir, from you or any other man?" cried the Kid, with a fair assumption of honest indignation. "I'm white as they make 'em, sir, and never—why should I hide from you?"

The Telegraph Detective showed his teeth in a grim smile, then his revolver came to the front, gently tapping that blanching face for a bit before McPherson spoke again:

"You've had your shot, Omaha, and the next one belongs to me, by all rights, human or divine. Shall I take it now?"

"Don't—don't shoot, sir!" huskily quavered the fellow, shrinking back, but mercilessly followed by that engine of sudden death.

"I'll surely shoot if you don't talk straight, Omaha. I'd have shot you on

sight, only for feeling pretty sure there's a heap-sight bigger fish lying back in the puddle! Now—will you croak, or sing, Kid?"

"I don't—I can't catch on, sir!" stammered the cowed knave.

"So much the worse for you, then, Omaha. What message shall I transmit to your dear Nebraska friends or relatives, Kid?"

With almost icy coldness came this question, and death surely glittered in those pitiless dark eyes.

Omaha Kid felt as much, and his remnant of nerve gave way.

"Don't kill me, sir! Don't shoot—I'll tell all I know!"

"Good as old wheat, my covey!" declared McPherson, heartily, lowering his gun, but still holding it in fair view as a possible reminder. "But as a specimen of your conversion, Kid, who shot at me, down yonder?"

"I did—because I had to—just had to, sir!"

"Poor lad! Terribly abused you've been, for a fact!" mocked the Telegraph Detective; then adding in sterner tones. "Who set you on my back, Omaha?"

"I don't know—"

"Steady, Kid!" his gun slightly rising once more.

"The boss, sir, but I don't know just who or what he is!" came the hasty addition, in dread of worse. "I was paid big money to pick you off the perch, sir, and I just had to take the job, whether I liked it or not!"

"Steady, Kid! Don't tread on your own heels, please," coldly warned the detective, his face betraying no emotion but his blood flowing a bit more rapidly than usual as he scented important information lying back of this little adventure.

"It's gospel truth I'm giving you, sir!"

"Of course you wouldn't stoop so low as to lie, Omaha, and that's why I'm drinking in your gospel soup so eagerly. Now—big money, eh? Who offered it to you for putting me to sleep, Kid?"

"The boss."

"And pray who may the boss be, Omaha?"

"You tell, sir, for blessed if I know how!"

"Can't, or won't, Kid?"

"Just can't; simply don't know how, sir!"

"Where did you first meet this mysterious boss, then? Here at Mineral Point, or across on the line?"

"Neither; back at Omaha. But, sir, can't I go if I beg pardon for playing the fool—on my knees, even?"

"Not until you've told a heap-sight more than you've let fall to date, Omaha. And, don't forget: you owe me a shot, and I'll claim it for a moral, unless you can buy me off. Understand, Kid?"

Despite that outward quietude, Alick McPherson distinctly meant each and every word which crossed his lips, just then.

The Omaha Kid was shrewd enough to recognize this fact, and with a long-drawn breath he accepted the inevitable, huskily speaking:

"All right, sir! He's a devil on ten wheels, but— Well, you've got me, and the boss hasn't! What must I tell, first, please?"

"You say you first met the man you term 'boss' in Omaha?"

"Yes, sir; worse luck me!"

"You're not over head and ears in love with him, then?"

"That merciless devil! Don't you begin to think it, sir! I'd dance for pure joy to see him climb a tree—neck-first!"

"Better yet! You'll hardly spoil a story for love's sake, then, I fancy. And so, since you hate the boss, why serve him?"

Omaha Kid flushed hotly, then turned pale, his eyelids drooping.

"Careful, Kid!" grimly warned the detective. "One little lie may make all the difference between life or death with you, now!"

"Well, sir, I reckon I'll out with it he knew I'd been acting on the crook, and so—when he held up a finger, I couldn't hang back; and when he whistled, I had to dance to his music; see?"

"Yet you said you didn't know who or what he was; careful, Kid!"

"That's what I did, and devil a lie in it all, either! He knew me heap sight better than I ever knew him, and showed me the sign— Well, when he said follow and play my dirty cards, I just had to do it, sir!"

"And you met him in Nebraska, you say?"

"In Omaha, yes. That's my old stamping-grounds, and—"

Leaning forward, McPherson tapped arm with gun, speaking sharply:

"Where did they take Jaffrey Zattell's boy and girl, Kid?"

The fellow shrunk away, lips parting in an involuntary cry, his face paling again and his eyes protruding wildly.

"I didn't— How'd you guess that, sir?"

"Never mind, Kid; I'm asking questions, and you're the one to do the responding. So last call, Omaha."

Apparently the Omaha Kid was too amazed to answer, and the Telegraph Detective spoke again:

"Don't take time or trouble to hatch up a lie, Kid. I know enough of the actual facts to make you pull hemp at will; and hang you surely shall, unless you buy your life and liberty. Now, talk white, Omaha!"

"I will! I'll tell everything I know, only—"

"Leave out the provisos, please. Now, where were the young couple taken when carried away from the private car, Kid?"

"I don't know—before Heaven, I don't know, sir!" hastily spluttered the thoroughly cowed knave, as that menacing muzzle moved closer to his face.

"You were one of the gang at Silver Leaf, Kid, and I know it!"

"Yes, sir; I own up to that much. But I wasn't there when the boss turned that trick."

"Where were you, then?"

"Way off to the rocks, sir. Hope I may die if 'tain't so, sir! The boss sent me to start a fire, as a warning to the rest of the gang at Grape-vine Gorge, and so— That's all I can tell you, sir!"

The detective was watching his prisoner with close attention, and he felt fairly well assured that Omaha Kid was speaking the truth, so far, yet he was far from satisfied that the fellow was telling all he knew concerning the present whereabouts of the abducted couple.

If away on that important mission, of course he could not have taken part in the actual assault upon Jaffrey Zattell and the capture of the millionaire's children; but surely he must have learned something more of importance since that misty night.

Letting that particular point pass for the moment, hoping still to catch the Kid napping, McPherson asked another question:

"Why did your boss, as you term him, think it worth the risk to put out my light, Omaha? Take your time to answer, for I never could bear to repeat my words: I'd rather shoot, honest!"

Omaha Kid stirred uneasily on his mossy seat, flashing an apprehensive glance around, like one who fears he be escaping one peril only to plunge himself into a still more deadly one.

His was a hang dog look, just then, and his expression was so much like that of a treacherous informer, that Alick McPherson deemed it only wise to let drop another grim warning before permitting the Kid to go further.

"Play clean white, Omaha! That's a mighty snaky look you tote in your two eyes, and while I'd hate to end all with a blue pill—"

"Don't, sir! I'll tell you everything, if only you'll promise to stand between me and the boss! If he finds out I'm peaching on him, he'd bloody-murder me like a micel!"

"I'll take care of your boss, never fear, Omaha. Just so you make a clean breast of it all, from start to finish. Now—spiel, Omaha!"

Another apprehensive glance around, then the Kid leaned closer to his present master, face growing confidential and communicative.

"Well, sir, it's just like this," he began. "The boss knew you were at work trying to—"

The sentence was never finished as it was intended.

A whip-like report stung out upon the

calm air, and Omaha Kid sprung convulsively to his feet, throwing aloft both arms, then falling like a log, a small round hole showing directly in the center of his forehead!

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO KILLED THE OMAHA KID?

ONLY that one spiteful retort, but no more was needed, so far as the young man from Nebraska was concerned.

Alick McPherson saw that little round hole; for the first breathless instant looking a mere, harmless bruise; but then the red blood bubbled forth, and it needed not a second glance to tell the Telegraph Detective Omaha Kid was dead; killed as swiftly as though touched by a fiery bolt from heaven itself!

The merest fraction of time thus, then McPherson sprung with cat-like activity to the nearest cover, at the same time flashing a look up and back toward the point from whence instinct warned him the murderous shot must have been sped.

And instinct did not deceive him, either, for yonder, far up those rugged rocks, he caught sight of a tiny cloud of bluish vapor, slowly rising and unfolding upon the still air, fading into nothingness even as he took note.

Not a sound, not a sight, no further assault, although the detective expected a shot or two even as he jumped for shelter, for he firmly believed that his life had been aimed at, and that Omaha Kid had fallen victim to an unsteady or an unpracticed aim.

His choice of cover had been limited by the wisdom of swift action, and Alick knew that cold lead could freely search that scrubby bush to find or to kill; and gripping tight his trusty guns for swift use, the detective kept keen watch upon yonder frowning rocks, expecting the death test to come with each dragging moment.

Yet all remained still up yonder!

That little smoke-cloud had faded into nothingness. Eye nor ear could detect aught murderous in that quarter.

A downy woodpecker crossed his field of vision with undulating flight, pausing with its shrill cry at a gnarled tree growing almost directly in front of that ambush, then beating a sharp tattoo on a dead limb before nimbly circling trunk and boughs in quest of worms or ants.

All seemed so quiet, so peaceful that one could hardly believe foul murder there abideth; but at that thought Alick McPherson involuntarily glanced toward yonder silent shape with upward staring yet sightless eyes, a circle of tiny bubbles surrounding that discolored spot branding the luckless fellow's white forehead.

Surely dead! Slain without time for cry or for prayer!

His life snuffed out just as he bade fair to prove of some actual service in this world!

A hot wave flashed over the Telegraph Detective at this, and all at once he seemed to recognize what a serious loss this was to himself, professionally speaking.

"The devils! Only another minute, even!"

Gripping pistol in his right hand ready for a snap-shot, McPherson gathered himself, then made a bold leap for another shelter closer the base of those rocks, fully expecting a shot or two by the way of greeting.

But none such came, and as he crouched low down once more, hearing and seeing nothing, the detective began to wonder if, after all, the assassin might not have fled immediately after that fatal shot, frightened by his crime, or demoralized through knocking over the wrong target?

All this takes time to tell, but only a few moments had elapsed since the Kid toppled over in death; and growing cool and clear-brained, once more Alick McPherson resolved to press matters to the bitter end.

Acting on this stern resolution, then, the detective made another rapid shift of position, still without interference from above.

This immunity from shot or stroke almost convinced McPherson that his growing fears were only too well founded: that the slayer of Omaha Kid had taken to speedy flight; but still he was too shrewd to invite his own destruction without fair cause, and kept up his tactics until he knew he was fairly well shielded from eye or aim of any enemy who might still be lurking on or near yonder bush-screened shelf of rock.

From the point he had now attained, McPherson could look upward and mark out his easiest course by which to scale those rugged rocks.

Doing this, he removed his hat, putting it on the muzzle of his pistol, then cautiously moving it forward and outward, as though its wearer was endeavoring to win a covert glimpse at the enemy.

An old and threadbare trick, and no shot, no sound followed the action; but McPherson now felt fairly convinced his precautions were useless, and throwing aside all prudence, he made a rush at the rocks, climbing up and over the rough crags with all the agility of a born mountaineer, heading as directly as possible for the shelf from whence he felt morally certain that death-shot had been sped.

Up and up never faltering, never pausing for breath or for cooler thought, each passing moment but adding to his hot rage and fierce disappointment.

Curses cover from top to toe the knave who cut that promising confession with his fatal pellet!

Five minutes longer—one poor minute, even!

And now—stilled forever in death, his story untold, his important secrets lost forever!

Little wonder, then, that the Telegraph Detective should rage and fume while desperately scaling those rocks, or that he should break forth in unseemly sentences when, after risking both neck and limb times untold, he reached that rock shelf, to find it vacant save for himself!

Neither sight nor sound of the assassin!

Those bare rocks retained no trail sufficient for even those keen eyes to read aright.

Gone! And yonder lay poor Omaha Kid, dead, a bullet through his brain, and his story left untold forever!

Alick McPherson had been buffeted about by capricious fortune more or less during the past few days, but this proved to be by far the bitterest disappointment of them all.

Just to think!

Omaha Kid certainly knew who had stood head and front of that assault and double abduction!

He surely knew whither those prisoners had been carried, and could have directed or acted as guide to a rescuing party; but now—

"Satan toast the devil who fired that shot!"

McPherson could readily divine by what avenue the assassin had made his escape, unheard as unseen.

Back of that narrow ledge of bare rock ran a narrow passage, almost completely arched over with gray rocks; while the scrubby trees in front effectually masked all opening from eyes on the level below.

Alick followed this passage for a few rods, pausing when he came to a spot from whence he could gaze far out and away over a rugged stretch of ground.

He looked in vain for any moving shape, for any human figure; that wild expanse seemed wholly deserted by animal life.

Then the confused sound of voices came to his ears, and pausing barely long enough to fix the direction, McPherson turned back, quickly regaining the ledge of rock, from thence looking down upon a number of citizens, doubtless attracted to that quarter by the death-shot.

Almost instantly the detective was sighted and recognized, as a loud shout plainly indicated; and without so much as a thought of personal peril, McPherson called back with wave of hand, then nimbly swung himself over the ledge by a pine-top, descending the rocks with movements as certain as they were rapid.

Not until he fairly struck the level and faced that way, did Alick recognize the tall, athletic shape of Flashy Fred; but then he had gone too far to retreat; as, indeed, why should he?

There was no love lost between the pair, but McPherson felt that he had a score ahead, and that it rested with Hibbert whether or no they should come to a 'mix-up' on this occasion.

As for anything more dangerous than a personal encounter with the Giant Gambler the detective never once thought of that.

Perfectly innocent of harming Omaha Kid,

it never occurred to him that others might look his way with suspicion, much less openly accuse him of murder!

Nearly a dozen men, all of them carrying weapons, had already gathered on the scene, while still others were coming up, singly, in pairs or in triplets.

As such matters will, word spread with curious rapidity that blood had been shed and even as McPherson reached that level, dark and ugly if covert looks were beginning to turn his way.

Flashy Fred slowly drew back as McPherson advance, busying himself with looking for signs which no other eyes could or had noted, but the detective cared precious little for that avoidance just then.

He recognized several of those who had witnessed his brief encounter with Billy McCoupin in front of the laundry run by Chough Lee, and it was more directly to these that Alick gave his rapid explanation.

He told a straight story, far as it went; but, of course, omitted all reference to the confession which had been cut short by death.

But even as he made it, McPherson saw that this reservation was doing more harm than good: those dark looks turned to open frowns, and more than one damaging hint was let fall from sullen lips.

A warm flush crept into the detective's manly face, then faded away to leave him a bit paler than customary as his dark eyes swiftly, then slowly passed from face to face, reading in the majority growing doubt and dangerous suspicions.

"I've told you straight, gentlemen," he added, earnestly. "Maybe not quite all of it, for—"

"Course ye wouldn't, too!"

"An' the Kid a-layin' thar, too dead to skin!"

McPherson made a swiftly impatient gesture at this, tossing head back proudly, flashing glance over the crowd before speaking again:

"Don't burn your fingers, gentlemen! Don't do or say aught you'll be sorry for in the end! You look as though I had a finger in this foul business, and—"

"You was right hyar with the Kid, wasn't ye: hey?"

"Of course I was, but—"

"An' you's right thar yit, but—whar's the Kid: hey?"

"Dead! Foully murdered by a devil in human shape whom I hereby swear to hunt out and run down to the gallows if it takes ten years of my life!" fiercely cried the Telegraph Detective, lifting a tightly clinched hand toward heaven as though to register his oath.

"I tell you, men of Mineral Point, I'd rather sacrifice my left hand than had this happen just as it did happen!" earnestly added the detective, speaking swiftly.

"One brief minute longer—Omaha was just on the point of telling me all about the affair at Silver Leaf. He was explaining how Zattell was assaulted and robbed, and how the young people were carried away that same night by—"

As though this was the signal for swift action, McPherson was assaulted himself, from the rear.

Several of the fellows acted in concert, and while the detective was wholly absorbed by his fiery speech, they stole unseen, unheeded to McPherson's rear, then leaped forward, striking as they came, some grasping his weapons, others pinning fast his arms, all together bringing him heavily to earth before Alick could fairly realize what peril menaced.

Instantly all about was cast into wildest confusion, for by no means all of those there assembled were inimical to the Telegraph Detective.

But McPherson's assailants had the advantage of action in concert, each one knowing what was coming, and all prepared to play his part.

"Steady, the pile o' ye!" shrilled one tall fellow, gun in each hand as he sprung in front of that writhing, struggling heap of humanity. "All we ask is a fair shake. This man is ours, dead if we can't take him living! Back, or chaw cold lead, the pile o' ye!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE.

THAT desperate scramble lasted only for a few seconds, then Alick McPherson ceased his struggles, resigning himself to the inevitable, calling out as well as he could with all that living weight piled atop him:

"I surrender, men! Give me a white man's show, can't you?"

It took but a score seconds to complete their work, now his fighting no longer hampered them; and then the detective, clothes torn, faceshowing skin-deep cuts and bruises, was raised up on his feet, and flashing a swift look around, McPherson spoke out:

"Keep cool, friends! Even these sweet-scented ducks can't well hang a man before trying, and that's all I ask at their hands!"

"Hanging be blessed!" exploded one of the indignant citizens. "You never did anything to merit the rope, Mac, and we all know that!"

"Who killed Omaha Kid?" fairly squealed one of the captors.

"That's what I swear to discover," coolly cut in the prisoner. "And I trust you'll all be there to help do the hanging, gentlemen?"

A coarse laugh greeted this speech, and then came the words:

"I reckon we be hyar, an' so be you!"

McPherson frowned at that pointed conclusion, for none could doubt what inference was meant to be drawn; but he knew how essential it was to keep his head and his wits clear, just then, and instead of making hot or cutting retort, he contented himself with saying:

"You're barking up the wrong tree, gentlemen; but if you find any satisfaction in it, go ahead!"

"It's the same dug gun tree you're gwine to climb—head fo'most an' neck into a slip knot, blame ye, critter!"

This brutal threat gave McPherson just the opening he wished for, and he instantly improved his chance.

"Fair play's a jewel, gentlemen, and that's all I ask for. Can I count on that, or do you all mean to hang before trying?"

"No, no!" loudly cried the more respectable portion of that armed assembly. "Fair play, forever!"

"Good enough, and the sooner you settle down to sober business the better I'll be satisfied!" boldly declared the detective. "All this time the actual assassin of poor Omaha is making his escape, but on my honor as man and detective, I swear to run him down in the end, or lose my own life trying!"

Something on the stump-bench order, but McPherson felt fully justified in making the most of his chances with the odds so heavy against him as they surely were, now he came to look the circumstances over.

Alick was a bit surprised to see Flashy Fred still hanging back, rather than pressing forward, now his bitter enemy was fairly caught in the toils; but he knew this unusual modesty was owing to no good will on the giant's part, and kept one eye out in expectation of a foul blow coming from that quarter.

Since Hibbert was to be counted out in all seeming, McPherson took time to select the probable leader of the lynching party; but when this was done, he immediately opened fire on his own account, demanding:

"What have I been arrested for, anyway, Mark Dennison?"

The gaunt representative flung out a hand toward the dead man before making answer, grimly:

"Isn't it plain enough, Mister Man? For killing Omaha Kid, sure!"

"I deny the charge, and demand your proof, sir!"

"Didn't Omaha walk out here with you? And isn't he lying right thar, too cold to skin?"

This was one point on which Alick wished to gather more light, and now he saw just how dangerous his situation had become.

Still, he permitted nothing of his doubts or uneasiness to show in either face or in voice, and his lips even curled with scorn as he spoke again:

"It hardly calls for a Solomon to guess at all that, Mr. Dennison; but to set your troubled mind at ease, once for all, I'll frankly admit that the Kid did walk out here, arm-in-arm with me, and—"

"Wait a bit, please," interrupted the self-appointed judge. "Arm-in-arm, you say? Then you and Omaha were on very intimate terms, eh?"

The Telegraph Detective hesitated for a brief space, his face growing grave all at once. Then he slowly made answer:

"I suppose I might lie to you, sir, and possibly make you believe that lie Gospel truth. I might say Omaha Kid was an intimate friend, a warm side-pardner, and you couldn't prove the contrary."

"Do you declare as much, Mr. McPherson?"

The question came with feigned coolness, but Alick fancied he could detect a veiled eagerness, a covert gleam in those eyes, and instantly decided upon his course: the naked truth, though the heavens fall!

"No, sir, I make no such assertion. I never met the Omaha Kid more than two or three times before this day, and so far from being a warm friend of mine, he tried his level best to send me over the range!"

"What! You mean to say—"

"That Omaha tried to murder me this very day, down yonder in front of the laundry, while I was reading another tough a bit of a lesson in good manners," coolly cut in the detective, smiling grimly as his keenly roving eyes caught sight of the bruised and gashed mug belonging to the redoubtable Billy McCoupin himself, just outside that eager circle.

And then, speaking clearly yet too rapidly for easy interruption, McPherson told his story: told how he had been struck by a glancing shot from the rear, of his vain quest, of his ruse, and how it all ended in the capture of the Omaha Kid.

He explained frankly after what fashion he had "persuaded" the Kid to accompany him away from town and to that secluded spot.

And then, in slower, even more impressive tones the Telegraph Detective went on to describe all that followed, showing how all-important the life of Omaha Kid was to him, from a professional point of view, then telling how a single shot from yonder rocky shelf cut short his eager hopes; together with that still young life.

From start to finish this recital bore the impress of perfect truth and accuracy.

Not one of the honest members of that little regiment but what felt morally certain Alick McPherson had proved himself innocent of all wrong-doing, and certainly was guiltless of murder.

But the danger was not to be averted so easily, and as the detective ceased speaking, a burly fellow pushed more to the front, calling out in hoarse, coarse tones:

"A monstrous slick lie, but still she am a lie!"

Alick McPherson instantly recognized the bully whom he had so recently read a lesson in manners, and promptly retorted:

"Everybody knows your tongue is no scandal, McCoupin, and I'd scorn to even take notice of your foul belching—unless by holding my nose—if this seance wasn't a sort of free-and-easy, where all are at liberty to chip in."

"That don't make it none the less a lie, critter!"

"Coming from your lips it does, Billy. You're simply trying to play even for the thrashing I gave you down yonder, an hour or so ago!"

McCoupin showed no signs of discomfiture at this home-thrust.

"I was fuller'n a goat, then, or mebbe the lickin' wouldn't 'a' come my way in sech a turrible heap. But I lowed mebbe you'd spit out some sech truck, an' so—waal, lucky she don't hang all onto my say-so! Jest call out fer Toot Reser to come to the front, jedge, will ye?"

"Where's Toot Reser?" sharply called out Mark Dennison.

"On hand, jest like a toad-seed, boss!" came the instant response, and a fairly fitting mate for Billy McCoupin, so far as outward semblance went, shoved a passage to the little circle in which stood judge, prisoner and witness.

"What do you know about this affair, Mr. Reser?" asked the judge.

"Pritty nigh the hull darn business, boss!" came the ready response. "I was thar, or tharabouts, through the hull racket, an' I

done see him ketch the Kid off his guard, an' fo'ce Omaha clean up this-a-ways like he couldn't help himself: jest so, jedge!"

"What else did you see, witness?" sternly demanded the judge.

"Waal, pritty nigh the fu'st I ketched the glimmer of a gun, an' that opened my peepers wider a heap! I see the Kid hed run chuck up ag'in' it, boss, an' so—waal, pardy an' me jest took a sneak cl'ar up hyar, an' so we come to see—what we did see, jedge!"

"The truth, not lies, you scoundrel!" sternly warned McPherson.

"So much the wuss fer you, then, sir! Fer it's Gospel truth we see you pickin' a sort o' row with the Kid; jest what sort nyther me nur yit Billy couldn't fa'r make out."

"Picking a row, you say, witness?"

"That's jest what, boss! Anyways, this gent he 'peared like he wanted Omaha to say or sw'ar to somethin', an' Kid he didn't would, an' then one word fotch on 'nother say-so, an' 'fore cyther me nur Billy so much as reckoned it meant business o' that sort, why this gent, he jest up an' yanked out his gun—"

"You lie, you scoundrel!" fiercely cried the accused, unable to smother his growing rage longer.

At a sign from Judge Lynch two of the guards grasped the prisoner, holding him firmly, then Mark Dennison motioned for Reser to continue.

"Waal, jedge, thar hain't so mighty much to say," deliberately spoke the witness.

"This gent he jerked his gun, an' Omaha, he didn't hev nary no show fer his white alley a-tall!"

"An' so blame' quick you couldn't ketch half a wink, boss, this gent jest bu'sted Omaha's crust wide open!"

"Shot him, do you mean?"

"Jest shot him, yes, sir! An' Omaha never hed no chauce fer to pull a gun nur to 'fend himself—never a dug-gun weenty bit of a show!"

Toot Reser poured this forth in a veritable flood, and his appearance was so intensely earnest that the major portion of the crowd took fire at his words; and ugly curses, groans, yells and sentences poured out upon the air, the crowd rushing in upon the accused, while high over all else rung the voice of a single horseman who spurred nearer, holding up and viciously shaking a coiled lariat the while.

"Lynch him! Hang the cursed butcher, boys! And here's your rope!"

CHAPTER XV.

A CLUE FROM THE CORPSE.

"AND here's a tree as though grown for a gallows, right over his bloody victim!" fairly roared the voice of Flashy Fred, for the first time seeming to take part in that affair, although 'tis far from certain his had not been the secretly guiding spirit from the outset.

Strong hands tightened their grasp upon the accused, and McPherson was taken at a terrible disadvantage; but seeing only a shameful death before him, Alick fought as only such a man can fight against fate.

As the now fairly raging crowd closed in from all sides, yelling, hooting, cursing and fighting one with another while striving to grasp the supposed assassin, McPherson was hustled back and forth, kept from falling and disappearing beneath that beast-like mass, only by the pressure exerted on all sides alike.

Again and again rose the terrible yell of the lynchers, the cry for human blood, once heard never again to fade from memory while life endures!

A minor portion of the crowd tried to restore peace, shouted for surer proof of guilt before taking human life; but for the moment their scattered appeals went unheeded even if heard at all.

The man on horseback deftly tossed lariat over a suitable bough, catching the ringed end as it came down to almost touch the corpse of Omaha Kid; and then his shrill tones forced a hearing as he once more urged the lynching of the criminal caught red-handed.

Alick McPherson did what lay in his power, but that was very little under the circumstances; but the end was not to come then, nor after that fashion.

"Hold hard there, one and all!" rung forth a voice which commanded attention if not instant obedience. "Hold, in the name of the law!"

All who could looked that way, and from the dozens who recognized the speaker, more than one cried out:

"The sheriff! Sheriff Dan Hawkins!"

"And in the name of the law I command ye one and all to give over—close in, *posse*, and take possession of yonder man!" sternly ordered the official, himself leading the way pointed out.

With Sheriff Hawkins were a number of armed men in civil garments, and one at least seemed a non-combatant.

This was none other than the New York Director, Jaffrey Zattell, and his was the first face Alick McPherson fairly recognized when that desperate pulling and hauling ceased for the time being.

"Steady, everybody!" the Telegraph Detective shouted aloud as well as he could for lack of breath after that terrible struggle. "I'm not going to run or be run off! I'm here to prove my complete innocence, and fasten the killing on the right head!"

But that did not prevent Sheriff Hawkins from splitting the crowd wide open with his *posse* and taking full possession of the accused man.

Then, as almost always is the case when the first blind rush of the lynchers is checked, quiet followed, so far as actual violence was concerned.

"You never killed that man, McPherson?" spoke Jaffrey Zattell, coming up to the side of the detective.

"As God hears me now, sir, I never harmed him!"

"That's enough. Guard his life as though it was my own, men!"

Instantly the armed strangers closed around the Telegraph Detective, saying nothing but looking cool and determined, each man with hand resting conveniently near a revolver-butt.

McPherson frowned a bit at this, for now he divined the truth; this was a squad of detectives brought on the scene by Jaffrey Zattell to probe the mystery surrounding the abduction of his loved ones, and to effect their rescue if it lay in the power of trained men to do so.

Having first made sure of his man, guarding him alike against death by an unauthorized hanging as well as from escape by flight, Sheriff Hawkins cut precious little time to waste, bustling about like one used to undisputed authority.

He seemed perfectly willing to hear both good or evil, so far as the detective was concerned, although there were many more black than white marks given Alick McPherson.

At best his friends could only avow their perfect faith in his innocence of this crime; but those opposed could point to the bullet-marked corpse of the Omaha Kid, and repeat what had been testified: at least two witnesses had seen McPherson shoot the poor devil down without warning or giving the Kid the ghost of a chance to defend his life.

His attention being called thus particularly to the corpse, Sheriff Hawkins bent over the silent witness, staring wisely at that discolored spot between and above the eyes, surrounded by a little ring of half-dried blood.

Not much to be found there, surely!

"Never knew what hurt him, I reckon!" at length the sheriff muttered, drawing back a bit, to give room for one of his *posse*, who quietly spoke:

"Has anybody made a thorough examination, sir?"

"Well, he's dead enough, isn't he?" half-humorously asked the sheriff, shrugging his broad shoulders. "But—you're a doctor, maybe?"

"I have practiced surgery, yes, sir," with a crisp bow in return; then he knelt down beside the corpse, coolly, quickly fingering that head and running hands over the bosom.

Dead enough, for a fact!

But that wasn't precisely what the surgeon-detective was after, and then he slipped one hand under the dead man's neck, giving a short, peculiar ejaculation as he partly lifted that bloodmarked head.

"What is it, doctor?" asked the sheriff.

"Maybe nothing, maybe much," with a

keen glance over the crowd, then adding: "Keep the outsiders back, will you, please, sheriff?"

Aided by the majesty of the law, Sheriff Hawkins contrived to do this, and then the ex-surgeon spoke again:

"Who arrested yonder gentleman, please?"

"I did just that!" boldly declared Mark Dennison.

"And of course you took away such arms as the prisoner may have had about him, sir?"

"That's what! He's too mighty smooth on trigger to run any odd chances with. But—what of it?"

"Will you take full charge of those same tools, sheriff? See that the guns are fully identified, by both the accused and his accusers."

Hardly knowing what the detective was driving at, the officer of the law complied with that request, coming back with the information:

"It's all right, Doc; two guns, forty-five caliber!"

"Not forty-four, then?"

"No: forty-five, as you can see for yourself. But what—"

"That remains to be seen. Just keep an eye on my movements, will you, sir? Just to make sure I'm playing all hands clean white, of course!"

While speaking thus, the detective deftly turned the body over upon its face, then parted the rather long hair near the base of the skull, expecting a round lump or swelling, with his other hand extracting a keen-bladed penknife from his pocket.

"Now you begin to see, I reckon, sheriff?"

"The bullet! It didn't pass clean through, then?"

"Almost, but not quite. Strange, too, fired from so close! And—the bullet must have been sharply deflected by the bones of the skull, else the deceased was leaning pretty far forward!"

While uttering these words, the detective opened and made use of his penknife, laying bare the badly fractured skull where the swelling showed, letting the coagulated blood and watery serum run out, then deftly squeezing out the fatal bullet itself!

The instant it touched his open palm, the detective held it up in fair view, swiftly crying:

"That's what killed the man, but—it never came out of a forty-five gun: never in a thousand years!"

"An infernal fraud!" fairly roared Flashy Fred, just then; but the words were still hot upon his lips when the revolver of Sheriff Hawkins flew up to stare him full in the face, its owner crying out:

"You lie in saying so, sir! I'm running this little side-show, you want to remember, and I'll make any man prove his words—or eat 'em!"

Flashy Fred was not quite ready to enter into an open fight with the representatives of law and order, just then, and slunk back, growling and showing his teeth, but not accepting that grim challenge.

"Who's an old hand at the gun-business, here?" suddenly called out the detective, still holding his hand up where all might see the fatal pellet.

"I vhas dot, my own selluf!" cried a portly citizen, coming more to the front, his actions being greeted with calls and cheers for Hendrick Bergundthal. "I vorks my dime oudt in Yarmany, und coming py dis goondry oafar, I makes my peesiness dot same vhay: so!"

"Good enough, Mr. Bergundthal," and the detective gingerly placed that silent witness into the extended palm of the worthy German. "Can you swear that bullet ever belonged to a forty-five cartridge?"

"Does? Nein, nein! She vhas doo leedle enough!"

"What size would you call it, then, sir, if put on your ooth?"

A brief pause, during which Hendrick Bergundthal closely examined the bullet, freeing it from blood and crumbs of bones, looking at the ball from all sides before venturing an opinion.

"Vhell, yendlemans, she vhas bretty mooch like deese. Dot vhas no gomon goon-pall. Dot vhas neffer pe py dose gadridge-gases—nein! She vhas roundt pall,

'boudt seexdty fun der bound, und mate vor dot muzzle loader, at home!"

"On your oath, sir?"

"Yaw: I makes me mein oadth uff I haf me so! See! Dot show dose margs—dot pulled-moulds vhas loose py der shoint—so!"

Sheriff Hawkins followed all this with breathless interest, and now he caught at the fatal billet, satisfying himself that every point made by Hendrick Bergundthal was indeed correct.

He was practiced enough in firearms to feel assured that bullet never came from a factory for fixed ammunition.

For one thing it was a round ball, not a cone, nor a truncated cone such as are invariably used in modern firearms.

And, while considerably battered by forcing its way through the skull of the man from Nebraska, he could see that slightly irregular joint, caused by the bullet-molds being a trifle too loose!

"And here's where the neck was cut off!" he cried, exultantly, holding up the bullet as though for all to see. "That settles it, gentlemen! Alick McPherson never shot Omaha Kid, for this bullet came out of a muzzle-loader, sixty to the pound! And—if we'd been weenty bit later in coming on the scene, every man jack of you'd be murderers by now!"

A thrilling pause, then a sharp voice made itself distinctly heard:

"Why don't you ask who around these parts shoots a muzzle-loader, carrying a ball sixty to the pound, sheriff?"

Instant silence fell over that assembly, and men flashed swift glances to one another, while hands clinched tightly and more than one pair of bronzed cheeks turned visibly paler.

Sheriff Hawkins drew his sturdy figure rigidly erect, letting eyes move slowly around that little sea of interested faces before speaking:

"Well, gentlemen, I'm not saying just who killed the Omaha Kid, but I reckon we pretty much all of know and might name the person who carries a muzzle-loading rifle, sixty to the pound!"

Flashy Fred had fallen to the background when Sheriff Hawkins so bluntly "called him down," but now he strode to the front, thrusting back the broad leaf of his slouch hat, hands on pistol-butts as he cried out in sternly defiant tones:

"He's a dirty liar who even dares hint that Nathan Pollock or either of his sons murdered Omaha Kid. I say it, and I'm Flashy Fred!"

CHAPTER XVI.

UNLOCKING THE CAPITALIST'S LIPS.

THE Giant Gambler whipped forth his guns and stood on guard, evidently expecting an immediate acceptance of his bold challenge; but no such action was taken, just then.

Alick McPherson, clothes torn and sadly disheveled as to hair and general appearance, was now standing close back of the sheriff, and his hand went forth to grip that official's arm.

"I don't believe either one of the Pollocks fired the shot that killed the Kid, Mr. Hawkins."

"But—the bullet, McPherson?"

"Give me a little time and I'll agree to show you a dozen different muzzle-loaders, either one of which might have spit forth that very death-pill, sir!" earnestly asserted the Telegraph Detective.

"Well, one thing is fairly proven: you never did the killing, lad!"

"No, I would have given my left hand rather than have the poor fellow murdered just then, and just that way! Another five minutes—"

"He was about to blow the gaff, Mac?"

But the detective was not quite ready to enter fully into that part of his recent experience, and evading the point he sternly added:

"I swear this much, gentlemen! I'll find out just who did murder this poor fellow, and so clear not only myself but Nathan Pollock as well! I'll keep to the scent until I've run the assassin to earth, let the guilt lie where it may; but I declare my firm be-

lief in the complete innocence of the Pollocks, father and sons!"

"That's strong talk, but it's clean white!" declared the sheriff, firmly gripping the hand of the Telegraph Detective. "Call on me to back you up when the campaign fairly opens, old man! I'll be glad to serve in any capacity, from chief cook to bottle-washer!"

"Thanks, awfully! Maybe I'll remind you of that pledge, sheriff."

"You'll not need to strain your voice, Mac! But now—Attention, gentlemen, all!"

Silence reigned, and Hawkins spoke earnestly:

"You've come awfully nigh putting down a terribly black mark against this day, neighbors; but lucky it's turned out no worse! You've all seen how clearly Doc, yonder, proved McPherson couldn't possibly have killed Omaha Kid; and so—"

"Whar's the durned whelpas done swore to sech a dirty lie, then? Whar's Billy McCoupin and Toot Reser?" just then called out a stentorian voice; but in vain were those knaves looked for, now.

Seeing how the tide was turning against them, they "took a sneak," only too glad of the chance!

"We'll settle accounts with them later on, but for right now, gentlemen—one last word! Hurrah for Alick McPherson, as white a man as the good Lord ever let trample his foot-stool!"

Long and loud rung forth those wild cheers, and after bowing his thanks, Alick McPherson put on his hat and belt of arms, moving slowly away toward the quarter where he saw Jeffrey Zattell in waiting.

The old gentleman was frowning darkly, gnawing his under lip with impatience, all unused to wait upon the whims of others.

"I thought those idiotic rascals would never let you go, McPherson!" was his half-surely, half-irritable greeting. "What have you discovered, up to date? Nothing, of course! 'Tis always thus with you professional bloodhounds—eh?"

"I have learned something, Mr. Zattell!" gravely answered the Telegraph Detective, after making sure no other ears were dangerously nigh. "And that little might easily have been much, only for your ill-timed caution, sir!"

"What! I don't understand how—"

"Will you draw a little apart with me, Mr. Zattell? Little as I may have picked up since reporting last to you, it's still too much to throw away on outsiders."

"Then—my children?"

That hard voice softened a bit, and those cold eyes seemed to glow with a far kindlier fire.

If no other redeeming quality was his, Jaffrey Zattell loved his son and daughter.

"It's concerning them, although I could wish 'twas more satisfactory tidings, if only for your sake, Mr. Zattell."

"They are not—they are still—alive?"

"And will be so long as their lives or liberty represents a little mint of money, sir!" swiftly assured the detective, leading the way to a more secluded spot, where they could talk together without fear of inopportune intrusion.

When satisfied with their present situation, Alick McPherson cut no time to waste, but at once told the yearning father what he had been enabled to glean from the lips of the Omaha Kid before that dastardly shot from ambush forever stilled that tongue.

"The poor fellow was just on the point of telling me all he knew about the abduction, as well as about the head rascal who seemed to engineer the whole thing from start to finish!"

"Then—he gave a name?" asked Zattell, his voice far from steady as he asked the question.

"No. And I wasted much precious time through having been kept so thoroughly in the dark by you, Mr. Zattell," coldly, almost harshly declared the detective.

"I don't—what can you mean, sir?"

"Well, that's why I wished you to come out here where we might talk without much fear of interruption, Mr. Zattell. You urged me to take up this case, and do my level best to rescue your children?"

"Certainly! And I promised to pay—"

"Let that drop, if you please, Mr. Zattell. Time enough for talking of reward when the

price is fairly won. Only—if you had been wholly frank and open with me at the start, I could have pinned the Kid down much sooner, and so won more of his confessions. Can't you see, sir?"

Zattell frowned a bit, but made no immediate reply.

A brief pause, then the detective added:

"As it was, I learned just this much: Your son and daughter were carried off with an eye to ransom, for one thing; and yet I can almost take oath the whole scheme has been the work of a personal enemy of your own, sir!"

"Why—how can you think that, pray?"

"For one thing, the arch-plotter came from the East with you: from Omaha, at least, on the same train that carried yourself and family!"

"No, no! It can't be true!" almost screamed the capitalist, showing powerful agitation. "If he had been with us, wouldn't I have known him? Even in disguise that devil couldn't—"

"That devil could, and did, to a moral certainty, sir," coolly interjected the Telegraph Detective. "It's a positive fact that the fellow rode with you all the way from Omaha to Silver Leaf, and very likely he trailed you all the distance from the sea-board."

"I can't think it! Surely he couldn't have kept out of my sight for so long, and if once I clapped eyes upon his face or his figure—"

"Unless thoroughly disguised," insinuated McPherson.

"Even then! And yet—heaven pity poor Felicia if she really has fallen into the clutches of that pitiless demon!"

McPherson laid one hand lightly upon an arm, waiting until Jaffrey Zattell met his steady gaze, then he spoke, gravely:

"Now sir, the future rests with you. Will you trust me further, telling me everything which can possibly aid in throwing light upon this case, or must I let the whole matter drop right here?"

There was a brief pause, a visible hesitation, and McPherson added:

"You are surely man of the world enough to know, Mr. Zattell, that whatever confidences you may make in one of my profession, will never be violated in any sense of the word. My duty performed, all is blotted out and ready for a fresh start in some other case."

This argument, or some other potent influence, decided the capitalist to treat his agent frankly, and he proceeded to speak of one bitter personal enemy, called Cyril Chatterton, once a power on Wall Street, but whose financial wings had been closely clipped by himself, Jaffrey Zattell.

"He swore vicious vengeance upon me for besting him in the deal; he openly swore that I played him foul, and gained my ends through bribing his private secretary and—bah!" with a scornful outflinging of one plump white hand.

"'Twas all a rank lie, of course, but you can guess the rest. He set up such a terrible cry that at last I was forced in self-defense to sue him for malicious libel, easily winning my suit, and thereby imbittering Chatterton tenfold more, if possible!"

"And you think he may have tried to play even, after this manner?"

"I do believe it, now, for I've found out by wire that Cyril Chatterton has vanished from the city—that he left at or very near the same time I took my departure. And—if that devil really has gotten hold of my poor girl—curses cover him from top to toe!"

Alick McPherson felt a shrewd suspicion that Zattell was still holding something important in reserve; but he felt fairly well assured that the whole truth would now leak out, and was content to let matters take their own course for the time being.

But before Jaffrey Zattell could say more, the two men caught sight of a man at some little distance, looking their way, yet like one hardly certain just where to find what he was seeking.

McPherson caught sight of a paper of some description in the fellow's hands, and recognizing him as a hanger-on about the combined store and post-office down in Mineral Point, he quickly jumped at a conclusion.

"I really believe Patsy's looking for you,

Mr. Zantell! A letter, or a message of some sort, most likely. Shall I call him—or get it for you, sir?"

Receiving a nod by way of permission, Alick went and returned with the article: a dingy drop-letter, as the blurred office-stamp indicated, marked "in haste" on one corner of the envelope.

Tearing this open, the capitalist read in husky tones:

"Call off your hounds and wait for word from me, else you may order a double band of crape for your hat: you'll surely need it!"

CHAPTER XVII.

FLASHY FRED ON A HOT SCENT.

It was a bitter pill for Flashy Fred to swallow, after coming so deliciously nigh forever ending the dangerous rivalry of the Telegraph Detective; but the big fellow was a fool only when deep in his cups, and now that the tide had turned so powerfully against his fierce hopes, he was wise enough to get out of the way himself.

It was purely through Hibbert's agency that Bill McCoupin and Toot Reser bore witness to that dangerous lie, and it was his covert hint which sent those two knaves sneaking off when the tide began to turn, for Flashy Fred knew only too well they would betray him to save themselves if fairly cornered.

Only waiting until it was morally certain that Alick McPherson would incur no further danger on the score of Omaha Kid, Hibbert withdrew from the scene with a degree of modesty very rare in one of his drum-beating and trumpet blaring disposition.

When fairly out of ear and eye range, the gaudy desperado gave full vent to his savage disappointment and vicious rage, cursing and raving, pounding the air with clinched fists, and fairly "turning all things blue" in that immediate vicinity.

Having thus worked off a portion of his surplus energy, Flashy Fred hastened away deeper into the hills, looking and acting like one who not only had some definite point in view, but fully expected to meet a party there or thereabouts.

Twice he slackened his pace to put fingers to lips and sound a low, yet far-reaching whistle; twice he received no response save by echoes from the rocky hills, and then he plunged still deeper into those fastnesses.

At his third halting, however, his signal-whistle was answered, and a few seconds later, a tall, gaunt shape came into his field of vision, to be impatiently greeted by the Hercules:

"Why in blazes are you trying to sneak away from me, Pollock? Making me blow my brains out whistling when—Eh?"

"Ef a critter never heard, how could he hear?" gruffly retorted the mountaineer, but studiously avoiding that keen gaze.

"It isn't your ears that's at fault, old man, so much as—Well, what made you do it, anyway, Pap?"

"Do what? I don't—"

Flashy Fred broke into a coarse laugh at this assumption of innocent ignorance.

"You don't know what you've missed, for one thing, Pap!"

"Did they run him up a tree, then?" eagerly asked Pollock, falling into the trap and betraying himself, just as Flashy Fred expected.

Instantly the Giant Sport's manner changed, his face growing dark with frowns and his tones deepening into fierceness.

He caught the mountaineer by an arm, gripping it until Pollock actually flinched with pain, then harshly speaking:

"Why did you do it, you hot-headed old fool? Or, if you just had to bust a cap, why didn't you keel over the other one: s-a-a-y?"

"I didn't never do nothin'—so help me Moses!"

"Bah! You done too mighty much, else not half enough, Pollock! Why didn't you shoot that cursed McPherson, instead of letting him go and knocking over one of the gang, instead?"

"Don't I say I never didn't? Durn ye, boy, cain't I say—"

"Come, Pap, what's the sense in trying to lie out of it, so late? You tote the very gun that knocked Omaha Kid cold, and—that same runty blue pill will stretch your neck a foot longer, old man!"

Nathan Pollock turned a more sickly yellow at this blunt speech, but Flashy Fred had his own good reasons for pressing that point home, and followed up his advantage without pity or mercy.

"What devil got hold of your trigger-finger, Pap? If you had to shoot, why not pull down on the biggest game? Or, if it had to be the Kid, then why not pile McPherson on top of him for even count?"

"I never piled nobody, hain't I tellin' of ye, Fred Hibbert?"

"Then you'll have the exquisite fun of hanging for nobody, Pap! Why, man, you've got the very rifle in your fist this instant! And I can hear rattling in your pouch more pills exactly like the one they cut out of Omaha's head, back yonder!"

Pollock shrunk visibly at this blunt assertion, then a hot wave of blood tinged his leathery cheeks for a brief space.

"The durned cuss! I done cussed him fer—but you're jest tryin' fer to stuff me, boy?"

"Don't you begin to think it, Pap! One of your pellets was found in the Kid's cabeza, safe enough, and—wait!"

Slipping hand into the skin bullet-pouch, Flashy Fred extracted a small round bullet, holding it up between thumb and finger the better to illustrate.

"Look, Pap! They saw where your loose joint left a tiny ridge 'round your bullet, and they even saw where you bit off the neck! Dutchy Bergundthal swore the pill came from a muzzle-loading rifle carrying sixty to the pound, and—"

Pollock seemed fairly stunned by this mountain of proof, but then he rallied, cursing viciously as he snatched back that bullet, and swung his rifle out of Hibbert's reach.

"I'm reeling it off straight as a string, Pap, and only for a bit of a bluff I gave the crowd, they'd be hunting after you hot-foot, to make you pay for Omaha's life with your own! And—sorry, Pap, but it's only Gospel truth: that bullet will make you stretch hemp, even yet!"

With another savage oath the mountaineer burst forth with:

"No she won't, nuther! Not ef I tell all I know, she won't!"

"The truth? What do you mean, Pap? Surely you shot Omaha and—"

"That's a durn lie, fer I never didn't nuther!"

"If you can only prove all that Pap!"

"I kin do even more than that, then! I kin show I never shot the Omaha Kid, fer I kin p'int out the critter who done did it!"

"Honest, Pap?"

"An' you jest knows it, too, Fred Hibbert! That cussed pardner of yours, which—"

"What? Surely not—the boss?" ejaculated Flashy Fred, grasping an arm with fierce vigor, leaning a bit nearer, his eyes all aglow.

"Waal, you done druv me to tellin' the truth, Fred," muttered Nathan Pollock, his tones lowering and his manner altering in a measure, although one familiar with the mountaineer might feel fairly assured he would fight hard in his own defense, let the consequences fall where they might.

After looking around to make sure they were not being spied upon, Flashy Fred took the old man to a little more secluded spot, then gravely ran over the main points of peril which had sprung up from that fatal shot, after which he warned the mountaineer to make a clean breast of the whole business.

Pollock seemed ready enough to talk, now he had been fairly cornered, and at once gave his version of the unfortunate affair.

In company with one whom he rather vaguely designated "the boss," he had caught sight of Alick McPherson and Omaha Kid, squatting close together, seemingly on the most intimate terms.

"Peared like the Kid was 'splainin' somethin' turribly interestin' to Mac; an' then—Waal, I reckon you knows the boss heap-sight better then I ever did, Fred?"

"Go on!"

"Waal, the boss gave a snarly cuss, like, an' jerked the gun out o' my grip. An' afore I rightly knowed what he 'lowed fer to do—she was clean done did!"

"You mean to say my— That the boss shot Omaha, dead?"

"Too dead to skin, an' that's jest what's the matter!"

"He shot at McPherson, and hit the Kid? Is that what you mean?"

"No, nary; he said the Kid was sellin' him out to that cussed bloodhoun', an' so—ker-blim!"

Something told the big fellow he was hearing naught save the naked truth, but he frowned as though the dose was a very unpalatable one.

Presently he broke that brief silence, asking the question:

"Where is the boss, now? Where did he go when you lit out?"

"That's more than I know, now," with his lantern jaws closing with a vicious click, then opening to add: "But I know right whar he will be ef trouble comes my way 'long o' this nasty job: yes, I do, know!"

"What do you mean by that, Pollock?"

"Business, every time! Mean that I'll save my neck by tellin' the hull truth from start to finish; that's what I mean, an' don't you fergit to 'member it, nuther, Flashy Fred Hibbert."

The big fellow made a scornful gesture, then cried out in turn:

"Bah, Pap! That would only insure your pulling hemp, don't you see?"

"What, me? Don't you begin to think it, boy! Why, I never so much as busted a cap, an' I kin take my Bible oath to every word o' that!"

"You may swear, but who'll give credence? The rifle is yours, the bullet was of your own molding, you were right there and—Pah! Your neck will surely pay the full penalty, Pap, unless you can prove an *alibi* clear enough to satisfy even your bitterest enemies."

Pollock turned a bit more yellow, and his gaunt frame seemed to shrink as he was thus bluntly put face to face with his deadly peril.

Flashy Fred saw that the mountaineer was fairly cowed, and quickly pressed home the point he wished to make sure.

"There's only one hope for you, Pap, and that is to deny everything—to swear you wasn't anywhere nigh the spot to-day, and knew no person who was. You must find those who can and will swear to your being elsewhere from sunrise to sunset, and with sufficient grit to stick to the one story through thick and through thin!"

"But, dug-gun it all! I never done it, an' he shorely did!" surlily persisted the old man, glancing nervously around on all sides.

"That's all right enough, far as it goes, but—can you prove it by other lips than your own, Pap?"

"No, but—"

"That settles it, then!" rising to his feet. "Go home, and then lie in snug cover until an *alibi* can be arranged for you. My bluff may work, but, if not, we've got to have both proof and witnesses to an *alibi*!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER POINT CLEARED UP.

FLASHY FRED watched the mountaineer as he moved cautiously away from that spot, casting nervously wary glances from side to side, grasping that long rifle with sinewy fingers, holding the weapon in readiness for swift use in case of arising need.

A grim smile twitched that glossy mustache, and Hibbert muttered to himself while watching:

"The old fool's on a wire-edge, now! If he might only run up against that infernal McPherson—wouldn't it be fun to witness, though!"

But his face turned grave and troubled enough as Nathan Pollock faded out of his field of vision, and then the Giant Sport himself strode away through the hills and forest, like one impatient to reach some definite spot.

Frederick Hibbert had an abundance of food for thought during that long and by no means too smooth journey afoot.

Events had been crowding upon him of late, and he hardly knew just how to make the best of them one and all.

For one thing, his brain was duller, his wits less clear, his invention slower and less brilliant for a month or two past.

"Too much heavy budget!" was the big fellow's frank verdict. "Reckon I'll have

to taper off until— If that little spit-cat, Cora Ball, would only smile upon me and my suit— Satan tickle her into a better notion!"

As he hastened along through that almost untrodden region, the Giant Sport fell to wondering whether he could not soften his obdurate sweetheart through her ties of blood?

"I can hang Uncle Nat by the merest turn of my wrist!" he muttered, going through the motions while speaking. "Couldn't I scarce her into— Bah! you ass!" in sudden self-disgust. "For that old rascal? Why, Cora'd feel more like laughing than weeping over Pap's pulling hemp!"

Forced by sober reason to abandon that hope, then, Flashy Fred let his thoughts rove further afield, settling on and around the as-yet mysterious personage whom Nathan Pollock called "the boss."

Thoughts by no means all blissful, judging from the dark frowns and fierce gestures which marked their course.

"The infernal hot-head! What made him shoot with Pollock there to play witness? Or—pity he didn't pile up a block of three, while he had his hand in?"

That savage thought turned his too-busy brain toward the Telegraph Detective, and per consequence to Cora and wedlock.

"Scare her by threatening Pollock? Devil a scare, then! She hates every hair of their heads: father and twins, alike! And—she loves the very ground that cursed bloodhound steps on—worse luck me!"

"I'll foolish her there, though! I'll kill or have McPherson killed before the week's fairly out, or I'll miss my guess!"

Taking no heed of passing time Flashy Fred pressed on through the hills, stopping for naught until he recognized certain landmarks which gave warning the end of his present journey was nigh at hand.

Slackening his pace and looking keenly around like one seeking some especial spot or person, Hibbert presently lifted fingers to his lips, sounding a low, thrilling whistle, pausing, then repeating the signal, adding an odd quaver at its termination.

A brief silence, then one short blast made answer, and giving a quick breath of relief, Flashy Fred lifted both arms at full length over his head, crossing forefingers for an instant, then turning hands to use their thumbs in the same manner.

All this was evidently performed according to regulation, for, as he lowered his arms, a couple of brief blasts sounded, and like one who feels the way is opened for his feet, the Giant Gambler strode forward, passing through a dense growth of trees and bushes, to emerge into an open space near the further edge of which he could now detect two or three small camp-fires.

Near one of these tiny fires stood a tall, shapely, well dressed man who was facing that way, and who seemingly at once recognized the new-comer, since he hastened forward with hands extended.

"You, is it, Flashy?"

"What there is left of me, yes," was the surly response, as their hands met; but then, tightening his grip and holding the other fast, Fred Hibbert spoke almost savagely:

"You've played the deuce, now haven't you?"

"I don't— What do you mean?"

A volley of fierce curses burst forth, but then Hibbert spoke:

"Why didn't you shoot that infernal bloodhound, Alick McPherson, instead of the Kid? Or—if you had to kill Omaha, why not pile the detective on top of the other?"

The dark man drew back, freeing his hands with an effort, and seemed on the point of making a fierce denial; but Flashy Fred gave him no chance for this, bluntly adding:

"Lying can't help you out, Cyril, so don't try it on! I've just come from Nathan Pollock, and the old rascal gave you dead away!"

"What did Pollock tell you, Fred?"

"That you snatched the rifle from his hand and laid out the Kid too cold to skin! And—those fellows found the bullet just under the skin at the back of Omaha's head, Cyril!"

The dark-hued man listened intently to this, then slowly nodded his head, after

which he spoke with admirable coolness, considering the awful deed with which he stood charged.

"Well, Fred, the facts of the case run pretty much like this.

"You know the Kid came with me all the way from the Missouri River, and that I trusted him rather more than I would have done only for the fact that I held his life or, at least, his liberty in the hollow of my hand; that a single word from my lips would put him where the dogs couldn't bite him!"

"That's all right, only—"

"Wait! It just happened that I caught sight of the Kid and McPherson, as I came back from leaving a drop-letter at Mineral Point for Zattell: about the girl and her brother, of course."

Flashy Fred nodded his comprehension but spoke not.

"Well, when I made out the Kid, and saw how confoundedly intimate he seemed to be with your pet aversion, McPherson, what could I think but that the fellow was going to sell us all out?"

"Satan grill him!"

"I reckon he will: anyway, I've given Satan a fair shake at the job," retorted Chatterton, with diabolical nonchalance.

"Well, Pollock and I contrived to creep nigh enough to see fairly well if our hearing wasn't all it might be. And then, when I surely saw Omaha blowing the gaff, I just—turned the trick!"

"That was all right, far as it went; but why didn't you make a neat and thorough job of it?" harshly demanded the big fellow.

"There was Alick McPherson, tenfold more dangerous to us all!"

"I know, and I wanted to take him in out of the damp badly enough, be sure!" frankly admitted the other villain.

"Why didn't you do it, then?"

"For reasons, Freddy, boy! For one Pollock was scared out of his breeches by my shot, and jerked his rifle away, giving leg-bail in such a hurry that nothing less than a buck could have kept pace with him.

"Then, McPherson jumped for cover, and while I could glimpse him a bit, 'twas a down-hill shot, and I didn't dare risk my pistols."

"Better that little risk than a far greater one, though!"

"Yes, if I could have foreseen just how matters were going to turn out; but that was beyond my ken," came the cool retort. "I hoped the detective would be charged with murdering Omaha, and run up a tree before he could fairly explain matters; but it appears I missed my guess."

Flashy Fred gave another surly growl at this. Evidently he failed to fancy or to appreciate this admirable coolness under adverse circumstances.

"Maybe you'll sing out the other side of your mouth before many more hours roll over your head, Cyril Chatterton!"

"Do you really think that way, Freddy, boy?" sneered the other, pretending to hide a yawn the while.

"Wait and you'll see for yourself, curse you, hot-head and cold heart!" growlingly added the big fellow.

"Because I've always been assured I'd neither ear for music nor tongue for singing," placidly continued Chatterton. "Thanks, my dear—my very dear boy!"

Flashy Fred broke into a low, scornful laugh at his feeble mockery, then sternly spoke again:

"You can make a clumsy jest of it all, now, Cyril; but the hour'll surely come 'round when the joke will be on the other side!"

"If you'd waited long enough up yonder to see what took place after the killing of Omaha Kid—"

"Thanks, awfully! But I had pressing business in a far different quarter, my dear boy!"

"Wait! They found the bullet which carried death to the Kid! And it was recognized by at least a score of citizens, as one of the pills used by Nathan Pollock or one of his sons!"

"Well, that's rather rough on Nathan, don't you think, Freddy?"

"'Twill be a mighty sight rougher on you, though! If the leaden clue is followed up—as it certainly will be—Pollock will blow the gaff to a dead moral! And then— Ugh!"

Flashy Fred made a grim gesture which could hardly be mistaken.

Chatterton merely laughed, lowly, lazily, carelessly.

"Well, there's one road out of the wilderness, Freddy; Pollock must hop the twig before he can tell what he may know, or even fancy!"

Flashy Fred gave a gruff oath at this, stepping back a pace, his forefinger quivering perceptibly as it pointed at the other villain.

"You bloodless demon! Most men would call me a bad pill, while you stand high and are honored by many grand people; but—when all's told, Cyril Chatterton, you'll be recognized as by far the biggest devil of us twain!"

Chatterton jerked forth a revolver quick as thought itself!

CHAPTER XIX.

BEAUTY OR BOOTY: WHICH?

FLASHY FRED instinctively drew back as that weapon flashed forth, his own right hand seeking a tool to match; but Cyril Chatterton had no thought for the Giant Sport just then.

Whirling half around as he drew, he leveled his gun toward a little clump of shrubbery only a few yards distant, speaking sharply:

"Hands up, or I'll fire!"

A moment's pause, then a husky voice came from out the covert:

"Don't shoot, boss, fer hyar I come!"

And then, greatly to Hibbert's surprise, the lanky form of Nathan Pollock showed itself, a half-sheepish, half-defiant grin wrinkling his lantern jaws, as his deep-sunken eyes flashed from face to face.

His hands were elevated in regulation manner, but the old fellow looked more like a wolf than a lamb, just then!

Chatterton glanced quickly from one to the other, then his weapon slowly lowered as his burning eyes fixed upon the big fellow.

"Your friend, I take it, Hibbert?"

Flashy Fred was flushing hotly, looking anything but friendly to either man just then.

"What the devil do you mean, Pollock? What fetched you here, anyway?"

"Them!" tersely announced the mountaineer, lifting first one foot then its mate, giving each a significant shake.

"How did you find this place?"

"You showed it to me, but I don't reckon you clean knowed what you was a-doin' of, though!"

"Steady, Fred!" and Chatterton put out a restraining arm just in time to check the Hercules. "And you, Pollock; how did you get in here without warning being given?"

"Jest snuck in, boss! They didn't nobody never know it, nuther! I jest tracked Fred clear to yender, then see'd him go through all them signs an' sounds an' flummydiddles; an' then—waal, I sorter wanted in, an' so I sorter jest come in—like!"

Chatterton gave a half-laugh at this characteristic description, then spoke again:

"A fool for luck, they say, and judging from this exhibition, Pap, you'll never be hanged for a Solomon!"

"Waal, ef arybody hesto hang, durned ef I'm gwine to do all the high-kickin'—no, I jest ain't, now!" surlyly mumbled the mountaineer.

"What in time possessed you to dog me all this way, Pollock?" Flashy Fred once more demanded, irritably.

"Waal, I mought lie to ye, reckon, but you wouldn't b'lieve it; so whar's the use? An' so—jest like this way, the two both o' ye!"

"Peared like I wasn't gittin' my sheer o' knowledge out o' this yer racket, and so—I jest tuck a sneak fer to git onto even terms in the big game!"

This explanation came doggedly, but Chatterton forced a smile such as Hibbert was unable to summon for this emergency; and his voice sounded fairly musical as he asked:

"Surely you haven't been doubting our honor, Mr. Pollock?"

"Waal, mebbe yes, mebbe no, jest as ye look at it, boss. But, thar's one thing dead sure, which is jest like this:

"Ef you two high-toned gents is real'y thinkin' of leavin' the ole man to hold the bag, he kin tell—heap plenty, too!"

"Tell what, my dear friend?" purringly asked Chatterton.

Who took the two kids, fer one thing; an' right whar they was held out, fer 'nother," coolly retorted the mountaineer.

All at once the man from Wallstreet seemed to take fire, but as though to maintain the just balance, Flashy Fred turned cool and swiftly interposed, one hand slightly shoving his partnerr to the rear, its mate gently tapping the old sinner on his breast.

"You ran a foolish risk, Pap; mighty foolish, let me tell you!"

"Waal, what else could I do?"

"And all the more foolish because I was already going to post you in all lacking details," smoothly assured the Chief of the Wreckers, paying no attention to that interruption.

"It's turrible easy fer to talk, but—"

"I'll prove it all to you, Pap, only grant me time. For one thing, if nothing else: we're surely going to require the assistance of yourself and the twins before long!"

All this sounded reasonable enough, and Nathan Pollock began to believe he had been entirely too suspicious. And after a little more deft "soothing down" Flashy Fred dismissed the old fellow for the time being, saying:

"Now you've passed inside the magic circle, Pap, it's all right. Go pard in with the rest of the boys, and when you're needed we'll know how to call you."

A brief look into their eyes, then the mountaineer slouched off, and slipping hand through an arm, Hibbert moved away with his pal to where still better cover offered itself for a confidential chat.

"Mind you, Cyril, you can't treat these free-born mountain-men like you do the slaves of your big towns," the Giant Sport observed. "If I hadn't pushed it just as I did—well, you might have a regiment all around you, and yet Pollock would have searched the very bottom of your heart with his butcher-knife!"

"The infernal fool!"

"Don't you pick him up for a fool, Cyril, or you'll drop him quicker than a hot potato! But let him go for the present, for—Cyril?"

"You're saying it, Freddy!"

"And I've just got to say it, too! You're cutting heap-sight too much time to waste, boy! You've got to crowd your game, and crowd it hard, or else lose everything!"

"What makes you think that way?"

"Because I just know it's that way, Cyril. Pollock will sell you out to save his own neck; you'd ought to see that much, as well as I."

"Not if he fills a high lot on the hillside, Freddy."

"You'll need a whole cemetery, then, don't you doubt it, boy! Pap is a mighty keen brier, and be sure he hasn't closed the way behind him. If he's here, you can swear both his boys knows right where to look for him, and whom to ask should the old sinner turn up missing."

"Well, three can feed the wolves as well as one," coolly said the Man from Wall street.

"That's worse than foolish talk, so drop it," sternly reproved the train-wrecker. "And now this game of yours: once more I warn you to crowd it before it's forever too late!"

All lightness vanished from both face and voice at this, and bowing his dark head a bit, Cyril Chatterton bit viciously at his thumb, then irritably burst forth with:

"How can I crowd it to do any good, so long as that little devil seems to hate me worse than death itself?"

"Then she knows all?"

"Not yet, but I've let fall a few hints pointing that way, and just as often she falls to spitting like a cat! I *did* think she'd break down under pressure, but now— I love the little demon harder than ever, Fred, and yet—I hate her, too!"

Flashy Fred nodded his comprehension, a grim smile showing itself for a moment or two, his thoughts going back toward another little woman who inspired just such a queer mixture of sentiments.

Never another man living could more thoroughly appreciate what the Man from Wall Street was enduring those days.

A brief silence, during which the comrades in crime seemed busily thinking, then Flashy Fred slowly spoke:

"You say you haven't showed up in your true colors to either girl or youth, Chatterton?"

"Not yet, but—"

"How would it do for *me* to play the head kidnapper, while *you* come in as gallant hero and bold rescuer-in-chief, Cyr?"

"Bah! That's worn threadbare, Fred. She's far too shrewd a piece to be foolish that way."

"Sure?"

"Dead sure! And let her once suspect that I am even in this half of the country, both she and Rodney Zattell would know that all this was my work," moodily answered Chatterton.

Flashy Fred shrugged his broad shoulders, mustaches and beard beginning to bristle with impatience.

"Well, pardner, you've got precious little more time to waste over preliminaries. For one thing, Zattell has imported a squad of detectives expressly to help him out of this fix, and—"

"How do you know all that?"

"I *do* know it, and that's enough for now. And so I say: crowd your game to the limit; if not one way, along another line."

"What do you mean by that, Fred?"

"Don't give Zattell time to catch on with his fresh force. Strike him for the ransom we agreed upon, and—"

"Curse the money! I want the girl, don't I tell you?"

"Well, haven't you got the girl?"

"Yes, so far; but that isn't the way of it at all. I want Felicia Zattell for my wife, confound you!"

Flashy Fred gripped an arm tightly, his big blue eyes fairly ablaze, and his face looking as stern as his voice surely sounded:

"Steady, pardner! A good bit of that ransom money is pledged to the boys for work done and work ahead. If they suspect you're playing off or going back on them, they'll strip your pelt to hang on the fence! And mine will go right alongside it, too!"

"Who said I meant to play off on them?"

"No one, as yet; but when you curse the money—"

"In comparison with the girl I meant, of course."

"Well, that isn't quite so bad," admitted the Flashy Sport, his own thoughts flying back to a certain maiden beside possession of whom, in a lawful way, even he would count money as worthless dross.

"Still, I say it all over, and I say it slow, Cyr: you've got to crowd the game from this time on, and win in a rush, or you'll lose heap sight more than the bare game. Mind, I'm telling you honest, boy!"

"Of course I'm going to do the best I know how, Fred, but one thing is flat: I'll never give up that girl now—never!"

"Heap fool you if you did!"

"Then why are you joshing me so mighty rough about it?"

"I'm not. All I've said amounts to just this: crowd your game or you'll lose it, and your life to make all balance!"

"If I go down in defeat, Fred, I'll not fall alone."

"Save your threats, boy, until they're worth while," came the cold reproof. "I've naught to say against your winning the girl, since you're so dead-set on having her for a wife—"

"If she doesn't belong to me, nobody else shall ever have a chance to claim her: that's sworn to!"

"Let it be so, then, but don't forget this one thing: Zattell has imported a regular army of detectives to back up Alick McPherson, and we haven't any time to waste, nor any long chances to throw away."

"You said all that before, Fred; why not change your tune a bit, and tell a fellow what he ought to do?"

"Would you listen if I were to tell you?"

"Make it worth listening to, and then try me on," came the swift retort. "But don't forget the main point: ransom or no ransom, risk or no risk, the girl has got to be mine—all mine! And that before I consent to yield an inch to Zattell, his army of detectives, the devil, or—even yourself, dear boy!"

"All right and so mote it be! Now—suppose you introduce me to your guests, pardner?"

CHAPTER XX.

FLASHY FRED DICTATES TERMS.

AFTER a few minutes spent in preparing for the introduction and what might follow, the two arch conspirators moved toward the snug retreat which had been provided for the present accommodations of their important prizes, Felicia and Rodney Zattell, the millionaire's children.

Cyril Chatterton had added a closely-fitting mask with cape and hood attached, which served to not only effectually hide his head and face, but changed his entire semblance most effectually.

"Good enough!" declared Flashy Fred, after a critical examination. "Your own mother wouldn't own you, Cyril, and you'd scare all thoughts of love out of even Dan Cupid's susceptible bosom!"

"You don't reckon she'd smoke me, then?"

"Not through the sense of sight, surely! As for the rest: well, some of these girls could give Satan himself points in cunning!" gruffly vowed the Giant Train-wrecker, his tones abruptly altering.

"You're stung by the same scorpion, Freddy?" his partner asked, half mockingly while peering through the holes in the less elaborate mask worn by the big fellow.

"If I am, I'm not coming to you for the cure, so let that drop!"

A few minutes later the two disguised figures stood before the prisoners, who had risen at sound of their approach, warned by the words which sent away the posted guards for the time being.

"Why this intrusion?" sternly demanded Rodney Zattell, his trim yet athletic figure drawn proudly erect, his left arm embracing Felicia, who was unusually pale, yet who likewise displayed a most creditable nerve under the circumstances.

"The master has come to pay you a visit, at last," announced the lesser mask, his tones purposely hollow and unnatural.

"And I'm here on business, you want to keep in mind, my pretty lambs," bluntly cut in the Giant Sport, taking no pains to disguise his voice for the occasion.

"I thought to have seen you long before this, but other matters prevented; and even now I haven't time to waste in smoothing over the rough points the way a young lady might expect; see?"

"The briefer you cut your visit, the better pleased we will be, sir," coldly said the young man, in no wise daunted.

"You talk just as though you meant it all, too!"

"I do mean it, sir!"

"All right, my gallant cockerel! I'll meet you on the same level, and add a thank-ye for the privilege!" mocked the huge mask.

"As I set out to say, I've other pressing if not more important business waiting, and so—here I come right at you!"

"I'm in this game to make a fair stake out of your (more or less respected dad, young people, and—"

"He is well? You have not—"

"Hush, sister!" almost harshly reproved the brother. "Don't sully your lips by even talking to such vermin; leave all to me, and—"

Flashy Fred burst into a roaring laugh, seemingly intensely amused by this proud rebuff; and turning toward the cowl, the mask spoke:

"If this is a fair sample, pardner, I pity your bed of nettles! And the young lady herself? Is she always as reserved?"

"Leave my sister out of the question, sir," sternly cut in young Zattell, face hotly flushed and his muscular hands working nervously. "I am here to answer for both; don't forget that, please!"

"Bah! I fancy you'll have a polite sufficiency in answering for yourself alone, Banty-game! And don't you forget that I can send you up a tree by the rope route by a single word!"

"I can have you bucked-and-gagged, by a mere motion of my hand! And I can measure out a thousand-fold worse punishment to your proud and dainty sister yonder, should my fancy turn that way!"

It looked as though Rodney Zattell would fling himself at the masked villain in fierce rage, but Felicia caught his arm and clung to her brother, whispering agitatedly only loud enough for his ears to drink in her full meaning.

But Flashy Fred could readily enough divine her wishes, and added a short, derisive chuckle as the young athlete calmed down a bit.

"Her head's worth a round dozen of yours, boy, to say naught of her beauty! But I didn't come here for a scrap, so much as I did to let you know just what sort of game you've stumbled up against.

"No need to tell you just how or why the trick was planned in the first place. Enough that this is the way matters stand right now.

"I've already sunk a pretty penny in this speculation, smoothing over all the rough places and paving the way to the success; of course all that has got to be taken into consideration when the balance-sheet is made out."

"Oblige us by cutting short all flourishes, sir, and coming to the point at once," coldly interrupted young Zattell.

"Who's running this circus, anyway?"

Rodney made no answer, but bit his lip until the red blood tinged his white teeth.

"Manners are manners, or if not they ought to be," quoth Flashy Fred, just as though he enjoyed it all, paying no heed to his comrade, who shifted uneasily from foot to foot as both brother and sister sent keen and searching glances his way.

"But let that pass, since I can add a few yellow rocks to even up all such minor scores. And—in one mouthful, my dear guests, you're here this day simply and solely because you've got a wealthy daddy!"

"In still plainer words, you mean to extort ransom?"

"A Solomon come to judgment!" mocked the big fellow, lifting his hands in admiration. "Hit it off, first clatter, youngster!" he added, in the more familiar vernacular.

"What sum do you expect to receive, sir?"

"Well, I've been doing considerable figuring over that problem, as a matter of course," frankly admitted the Giant Sport. "I'm almost ashamed to show you my figures, though, because I reckon you'll hold me terribly low down for appraising you at such a low value!"

Again the young man flushed hotly, and found it difficult to hold tongue and hand in check.

Only for his sister, Rodney would have leaped at the throat of one or the other of his captors, content to be punished on the chance of first punishing!

Cyril Chatterton took note of this, and fearing lest the chattering of his mate in running turn a bad matter worse, he muttered a hasty warning, which only brought still more suspicious eyes his way for a brief space of time.

Flashy Fred paid no heed in outward seeming, yet he did hurry up his nimbly wagging tongue a bit, saying:

"If you think I've placed my figures too awfully low, dear boy, of course you are at liberty to substitute more appropriate units, but such as it is, here you have it!"

"I've valued the life and liberty of Miss Zattell at thirty thousand dollars, net. I've put you down a few notches lower, of course, and we'll call twenty thousand your size. Added up, a neat, clean, tidy little fifty thousand chucks!"

"You'll never get anything like that amount, you extortioner!" hotly cried the young man, face flushed vividly.

"Won't I, though? Well, now, do you know I wouldn't mind risking a score or two brand-new pennies on that point? Why, boy, that isn't a flea-bite in comparison to your daddy's fortune! He could throw double the amount to the dogs, and never know 'twas gone, only by looking through his bank-books!"

"Father will never pay it—never!"

"Oh, yes, he will pay it, and pay it gladly, when he learns the alternative I have ready to present. And—I say, pardner!"

"What's wanted?" hollowly creaked the cowed villain.

"Fetch tools for writing, will you?"

By way of answer, Chatterton stepped for-

ward, stylographic pen and tablet of paper in readiness, which were taken possession of by Flashy Fred and held out toward the still defiant young man, saying:

"Take this and write to my dictation, Mr. Zattell. Nay, but I insist on your obedience, sir!" his voice growing cold and hard as Rodney drew back in refusal. "Shall I—don't force me to punish the young lady for your silly obstinacy, I beg!"

That icy coldness prevailed where hot and hasty threats would just as surely have failed; and sullenly submitting, Rodney Zattell took the pen and paper, bowing his head in token of readiness to play his part.

"Good enough, and you shall have a sugarplum when all's over! But now—to sober business!"

"Shape the words to suit your own taste, but don't distort my meaning, under penalty!"

"Tell Jaffrey Zattell just how you are situated; then add that you'll never be seen by him alive until after a ransom of fifty thousand dollars are paid over to us, as I dictate: that I'll add myself, later."

Waiting until Rodney signified that all was written, Hibbert added:

"Warn him to dismiss his little army of detectives, and neither take nor permit any one else taking any steps toward finding or rescuing you. Let him refuse to obey this, and worse than death will befall your sister—death will surely visit you!"

"When you've set all that down, let me see it, please!"

That was not long after, for Rodney proved to be a ready scribe, and knew he could only make matters worse by showing stubbornness.

The two knaves greedily read the document, and each expressed his approval, Flashy Fred adding:

"Now sign this, both of you, please, that your father may know we're not trying to run a gum-game on him. I'll add the terms and conditions of payment myself, later on."

Again Rodney complied, and then supported Felicia while the maiden appended her signature.

Then, when both ruffians were gazing upon the signatures, the young man sprang forward, clutching fiercely at the cowl and mask worn by the smaller villain, giving it a savage jerk that could not be resisted.

CHAPTER XXI.

A PAIR OF CONSCIENCELESS KNAVES.

WITH a roar of rage Flashy Fred caught hold of the young man, tearing him away, swinging him around almost as another man might handle an infant.

But swiftly as the Giant Gambler moved, he could not act quickly enough to wholly foil Rodney Zattell, for that disguising cowl and mask came away in his fierce grip, leaving the dark face of the Man from Wall Street fully revealed.

"What are you trying to do, idiot?" harshly demanded Hibbert, hands closing with bone-crushing force as he held his captive powerless to do more mischief.

"You, Cyril Chatterton! I knew it—from the very first I knew it!" cried the young man, letting fall that torn disguise, paying no heed whatever to the being who had so suddenly pinioned him.

And Felicia, too, gave a cry of recognition, shrinking back with utter abhorrence written in her every feature.

All the more savage at having no appeal made, no fight attempted, Flashy Fred gave a tremendous heave and toss, lifting young Zattell fairly off his feet, swinging him upward until he showed above that poorly disguised head.

Felicia gave a cry of terror as she sprang forward to aid her brother, and then Chatterton rallied from his surprise, quickly calling out:

"Steady, Fred! Don't harm the twenty-thousand pounder, man alive!"

Apparently that warning came just in time and couched in the right terms, for the Hercules laughed fiercely, giving his prey a deft toss and whirl which landed him on his feet a couple of yards away, then interposed his own huge bulk between the two men.

"Steady, now, you young whelp, or I'll jerk the daylights clean out of ye!" came his warning roar. "Back out, pardner, unless—"

"Too late for that, boy, and I'm not so certain I'm sorry for it, either," quickly answered Chatterton, smoothing his distorted hair, and looking with burning admiration upon Felicia.

"You treacherous cur!" sternly cried Rodney, pale and agitated, but betraying no fear for himself as he instinctively moved close to the side of his sister, as though he would still protect that loved one with his own life, if need be.

"Shall I clap a stopper on, matey?" bluntly asked Flashy Fred.

"What's the use? Let the young whelp bark, since he can't do worse. And now—I'm glad to come out in my true colors, after all! At least you couple may know I'm talking along a chalk-line!"

Chatterton moved over to where that now useless disguise lay, tossing it further aside with the toe of his boot, then rubbing his hands briskly together as he again faced his prisoners.

"Fall back a little, pardner," he said to the big fellow. "From looks they need no other support, and while so infernally independent—"

"Leave us, you scoundrell!" sternly commanded the young man. "You have forced us to breathe your atmosphere too long already!"

"Lay down and die, matey!" mocked Hibbert, beginning to enjoy that scene immensely. "Consider yourself kicked, pulverized, annihilated, you sinner of all sinners!"

"Quiet, please," a bit sharply ordered the arch-villain, lifting a hand by way of emphasis. "This is pure business, now, and I'll run the machine for a little time."

"Just as you say, not as I care, pardner!"

Chatterton turned more directly upon the prisoners, his manner altering to one of stern, almost savage menace, as he abruptly broke forth:

"You owe all this to that infernal cheat, your father! He treated me like a homeless cur, first getting me under his feet, then kicking me down deeper into the mud and mire as often as I tried to recover my standing!"

"Your tongue is no scandal, Cyril Chatterton!"

"Where my tongue lacks, my hands can make ample amends, Rod Zattell! Wiser if you bridle that too limber tongue of yours, my boy!"

With a piteous whisper Felicia drew closer to her brother, and the young man closed his lips tightly, lest worse befall that innocent one through venting his just indignation.

Chatterton smiled grimly at that, but made no comment. He added:

"Only for your father I'd never have fallen this low down! Only for him—Oh, the flint-hearted devil!"

"You know at least a portion of the wrongs he done me, the insults he fairly heaped mountain high! But no one living save my mother's son can even begin to realize all that I've suffered through that lying, cheating, sanctimonious hypocrite, Jaffrey Zattell!"

"You lie when you apply such foul terms to my father, Cyril Chatterton," coldly said the young man, holding his fierce passions well in check for the time being.

"Shall I gag him, pardner?" asked Flashy Fred, stepping forward.

"Not now. Let him snap and snarl if it does him any good. As for me, now I've started, I'll finish!"

"I tell you, both, that your father used me worse than a dog! He smiled and fawned and purred the better to gloss over his devilish lies until I was too deeply in the toils to break away; then he threw off the mask and showed his real character!"

"He stripped me of my thousands, and laughed me to scorn! He dealt me kick after blow. He thrust me back into the mire as often as I managed to get my head a bit above water, until—the pitiless devil!"

Fierce passion choked up his throat, and Chatterton was forced to turn away, leaving much unspoken.

Flashy Fred muttered in an aside:

"Bite it off shorter, Cyr! Jawing's little good, and we've got a gob of business to attend to, remember!"

This advice apparently had its effect, for

Chatterton smothered his savage rage in goodly measure, forcing an outward calmness as he once again turned to confront his captives.

"After all, what good to recall the past? You'd never believe me, although my every syllable was true as gospel writ!"

"Because you are a liar and slanderer, born and bred!" sternly cut in Rodney Zattell in spite of his sister's imploring look and touch.

Chatterton made a fiercely impatient gesture at this outburst.

"You're worse than foolish, boy, for every slur and insult you fling forth shall be paid for in full: in good, clean gold, or else in torture to yourself or sister!"

"You devil!"

"Ay, call me devil, for devil I am! Made thus by Jaffrey Zattell, and a devil I'll remain until I've won an angel for my bride!"

Felicia shrank away, closing eyes and hiding face upon the heaving bosom of her dauntless brother; for right well she knew what Cyril Chatterton meant by that sentence.

"Better death than that, you black-hearted scoundrel!" cried Rodney.

"So you say, now, but when the tight pinch comes—"

"So we'll say then—forever! I'd far rather see her a corpse than helpless at your mercy, and—death shall come to us both, first!"

"Torture shall catch you first, hot-head! And for Felicia—bah! there's other means than slaying, my pretty fools!"

"Not with us—"

"Not with me—"

As one voice came this double answer, and so full of intense hatred and loathing that even his thick hide was penetrated and he fairly shivered under the keen stings.

Flashy Fred his comrade in evil through and through, and seeing how viciously Chatterton was stung, caught him around the middle, swinging him around and away, then uttering a cry which right speedily brought the guards hurrying back once more.

"Bind that fool!" harshly commanded the Giant Sport; and without word or question the ruffians fell to work.

Rodney Zattell made a desperate fight of it, knocking more than one of those burly knaves down, dealing forth more bloody souvenirs than the ruffians particularly cared for; but, good little man though he undoubtedly was, Rodney went down before weight of numbers and was quickly put in bonds, hand and foot.

Meanwhile, Cyril Chatterton grasped the screaming, struggling maiden in his arms, keeping her from interfering, and at the same time brutally robbing her of kiss after kiss, ceasing only when the cooler-headed Hercules fairly tore him away.

Leaving brother and sister under guard, the fellow-schemers moved away to a safer spot for confidential conversation, when Flashy Fred bluntly opened the ball by saying:

"One thing's settled: Cyr, you slipped a cog at the start! Why in the devil's name didn't you freeze fast to the old man as well as his kids? That's where you made a mighty mistake, boy!"

"I know it," came the frank admission, "but how could I do different? All was in a terrible mix; plans had to be curtailed or lengthened to fit; I didn't know at what moment another upset might come our way!"

"That's why I didn't do any better; my hands were full to running over with the young couple!"

"You took the safe along?"

"To blind our trail, of course. Would you have me blazon the truth to all the world? And—I reckon you had the major portion of the gold taken, Hibbert!"

"Of course, or how could I even begin to run the gang? But that don't count. What we've got to look after now is like this:

"Take Jeffrey Zattell, clap on the screws until he squeals from the pinching, then reap the golden harvest in a holy hurry!"

Chatterton shrugged his shoulders at this, forcing a sardonic smile as he spoke in turn:

"Saying is doing, of course! What a marvel you would be, Freddy, if talk was current coin!"

"That's all right, matey, but I stick to it. Rope in the old man, put on the screws where his kids can both see and hear, and how long

will it be until the girl weakens? Why, man, she'll just beg you to marry her!"

"I'll do it—do it right away, too!" exclaimed Chatterton.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTURING A CAPITALIST.

It was night again, and, worn out by the labors of the day, Jaffrey Zattell lay soundly slumbering, for the time being lost to all earthly cares.

His face showed plain traces of worry, and dark circles surrounded his eyes as the dim rays of the oil-lamp he had left burning near the head of his bed fell athwart his countenance.

But little had been accomplished that day last spent, beyond the rescuing of Alick McPherson from the noose of the lynchers.

That brief yet terribly significant note of warning was even now clasped in his hand, having been re-read the last thing before falling asleep—read for the hundredth time at least since its receipt!

Until that note came to his hand, Mr. Zattell felt that he must "press things" at all hazards; but when he read that thinly veiled menace, his feelings underwent a sudden change, and in fear and trembling he forbade his detectives, including Alick McPherson, from taking another step in the matter until he could hear more definitely from the mysterious enemy who so surely held his "heart of hearts" in a deadly grip!

And so he had fallen asleep at a late hour, oblivion most merciful falling over his troubled brain and aching heart; until—

Without sound the chamber door slowly, cautiously opened, and a masked head protruded through the opening, glittering eyes seeking that placid face long enough to decide that sleep was real, not simulated.

Then two velvet-footed shadows entered the chamber, one closing the door, the other stealing to the bedside, holding a prepared article in his hands, carefully poisoning it above the face of the unconscious sleeper for a few seconds, then clapping it dexterously over mouth and nostrils, pressing the plaster home, at the same time throwing his whole weight upon the now struggling capitalist!

Swift as thought the second mask came forward, one hand gripping Zattell by the throat, the other holding a glittering knife before his startled eyes, sternly warning:

"Quiet, fool! Make a sound above a whisper, and I'll slit your throat wide as a cellar-door!"

"Be quiet, and no bodily harm shall be done you," added the mask who was manipulating that pitch-plaster.

Jeffrey Zattell was unable to cry out, or even to speak; but thorough though that surprise was, his wits did not entirely desert him, and realizing how helpless he was to even kick against the pricks, he tried to signify submission through his eyes.

"Let up a bit, matey," muttered the second mask, reading those looks aright. "He's going to play clean white, I reckon, and—Will you go with us quietly and decently, old man, or must we wrap you up in a blanket and tote you like a corpse?"

Jeffrey Zattell winked both eyes rapidly, and his meaning was understood; but the masked knave was not yet fully satisfied, for he added:

"It's just as well to smooth the way as we go along, pardner, and so—Just chaw on this mouthful for a weenty bit!"

"We've come after you, and we mean to take you, dead if not alive! Go with us like a lamb, and no hurt shall come your way. Kick at the wrong time, and you'll be the prime if not the only sufferer!"

"Can you savvy all that? If so, bat your eyes three times!"

The signal was given without delay, and then that crushing weight was lifted from his person, one corner of the pitch-plaster was pulled away from his nostrils, giving him much-needed air to breathe, then his immediate captor muttered in stern but guarded tones:

"Get up and put on your duds, Zattell! But mind: if you try to rack out, or make a sound louder than a dream, I'll slip six inches of mighty cold steel atwixt your blessed ribs—so there!"

The capitalist made no such attempt, however.

He knew that his life lay at the mercy of these ruffians, and that even should he arouse the slumbering house, they could easily kill him and escape by leaping out through the window long ere help could come that way.

And, too, he more than half believed this was but part of the same audacious scheme to which both his children had fallen prey; and he was hardly averse to joining them, even as a prisoner himself!

All this, then, prevented Jaffrey Zattell from giving his bold captors any immediate trouble, and dressing as hastily as might be, the old gentleman nodded his readiness for the next step.

As though they had discounted each step in advance, the masked abductors took prompt action, one standing with hand resting lightly upon the millionaire's shoulder while his mate deftly twisted and knotted the bedclothes into a rude yet effective rope, one end of which he let fall through the now opened window.

Then the masks changed places, the smaller man passing through the window and reaching the level ground below in safety and silence.

"You next," tersely muttered the other abductor, shoving Zattell to the opening, and then assisting him to pass through.

The portly capitalist was received by the mask in waiting below, who at once hurried him away through the night without waiting for his comrade in this daring adventure.

But that partner quickly followed after, joining them before they could reach the horses hitched at the edge of town, yet in a fairly secure covert.

Not until he was fairly mounted upon one of the two horses, with a lasso-end hitched snugly around his arms behind his back, was Jeffrey Zattell relieved entirely of that pitch-plaster.

This was done by the larger of the bold villains, leaning over, as they rode briskly along through the night. And then the fellow spoke:

"Keep on playing 'just as white and just as sensible, old gent, and we'll get along together sweet as cherubims in a honey-pot!"

"Where are you taking me to, gentlemen?" asked the prisoner, glancing quickly from one to the other; and as he turned his face on shoulder to see the ruffian riding behind him, a rude hand smote his lips:

"Shut trap, curse you! And you button lip, pardner! Time enough for chin-music when it is time!"

"What new flea's biting you, boy?" jeered the larger mask; but then riding on through the night in silence, so far as speech was concerned.

Meanwhile Jeffrey Zattell was beginning to doubt whether he had acted all for the best, after all.

Some echo in that harsh and muffled voice at his back gave him a cold chill, for it sounded—what did it sound like?

His thoughts turned back to days gone by, when he laughed to scorn the mad cursings and wild menaces of the man whom he had ruined in pocket, if no worse; the man whom he had rudely ordered out of his house for daring to present his plea of love!

Could it be that the Telegraph Detective was right in his shrewd surmise that all this trouble arose because of a personal grudge? And was it possible that Cyril Chatterton had stooped so low for his sworn revenge?

The larger mask acted as guide, leading the way deeper into the hills, far away from Mineral Point, where interruption or interference seemed among the impossibilities, then calling a halt.

Leaving his mate to guard their prisoner, the guide quickly collected material for a modest fire, which he soon had under headway.

Then Jaffrey Zattell was lifted out of the saddle and placed with back against a convenient tree, several turns of the lariat being taken around both body and bole before hands dropped away from his person.

Then, standing where those ruddy rays could fall fairly athwart his countenance, the lesser mask tore away the dark covering, showing his teeth in a vicious smile as he confronted his intended prey.

"Who am I, you devil? Who has you foul, now, Fraud Zattell?"

"Cyril Chatterton!"

Although he had more than half suspected some such revelation, Jaffrey Zattell turned paler and shrunk away from that diabolically handsome visage for the first instant; but then his courage and nerve returned, and he sternly made reply:

"You, of course, dog! There's not room in this wide world for two such infernal dastards, thank heaven!"

"He's into you clean to the elbow, pardner!" chuckled Flashy Fred, likewise removing his mask as no longer needed. "Scratch devil, claw baker! And I'll look on to see fair play!"

This jeering produced a good effect upon Chatterton, for his savage rage turned to an ominous coolness, and when he spoke again 'twas in low, even tones:

"I'm not here to bandy left-handed compliments with you, Mr. Zattell, but to talk sober business. And as a fair starter—listen!"

"Once before I did you the great honor to ask the hand of your only daughter, Miss Felicia, in marriage. Then you scouted me—"

"Even as I scorn and defy you now, demon!"

"Now I repeat that request, with a significant difference as you shall quickly realize," coldly persisted the arch-villain.

"Once again I ask you to give me your daughter for life. Give her to me, legally, lawfully, and in return I will grant yourself and son both life and liberty."

"Never, you cursed whelp of Satan, never!" fiercely raged the prisoner, striving his utmost to burst or slip his bonds and get at the throat of his malicious enemy. "I'd sooner see her dead than—"

"But would you rather see her worse than dead, Jaffrey Zattell?"

Icy cold came this query, and the father shrunk and shivered, seeming totally unmanned all in an instant.

Cyril Chatterton chuckled grimly, then the millionaire spoke.

"I'll pay you any price in reason as ransom, but this—never!"

Chatterton repeated his threat in more open terms, but the first sting was past, and he could make no further impression on his captive.

Just as often Jaffrey Zattell declared that he stood ready to buy the life and liberty of his children at any price within reason, but he sternly vowed that he would a thousand-fold prefer the death of his beloved daughter to seeing her bound for life to such a villain.

Growing impatient, Flashy Fred chipped in, but only to meet with like failure; no matter how they argued or threatened, the prisoner's answer remained the same.

Any ransom in reason, but nothing more, no matter what the consequences might be!

Chatterton, in his savage rage, might have materially injured the prisoner, had not cooler-headed if not clearer-witted Hibbert drawn him almost forcibly away from the spot.

"You're playing the ass, Cyr!" was his forcible assertion, when they were fairly out of earshot of the capitalist. "Get a brace on, man, or you'll ruin everything just as the tide is fairly turned our way!"

"That stubborn devil! I'll break his will, or I'll break his back!"

"Will goes, but leave his backbone; 'twill take all that to stand up under the load I'm picking out for the old fool!" grimly prophesied the Giant Gambler.

"What can we do, more than we've already tried, unless we put him to actual torture?" surlily mumbled the lesser villain.

"Like this!" and Flashy Fred moved a bit closer, hand on shoulder and beard almost touching ear as he whispered long and rapidly.

Cyril Chatterton listened to the end with growing interest, then he gave a little crow of anticipated triumph as he turned toward the spot where their valuable captive had been left.

Had been, but was no longer!

For, incredible as it may seem, that tree-trunk was vacant, and in vain the pair of amazed villains glared around in quest of their prize. Jaffrey Zattell had vanished,

even as though the earth had opened to swallow him up!

They dashed forward, cursing and raving, and then from out the night came the rapid trampling of horses' hoofs!

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DETECTIVE AND HIS SWEETHEART.

"WILL she see it? Will she come out before the background gets too dark to show the dead branch off?"

Over and over Alick McPherson muttered these doubts and hopes, now casting an uneasy glance at the dead branch signal above his head, then anxious eyes flashing back to yonder lone cabin on the mountain-side.

For more than an hour now the Telegraph Detective had been lying in wait, displaying the well-understood signal to catch the attention of his sweetheart, but as yet wholly without success.

Only for the front door being open, McPherson might have believed the place deserted of all human life.

Through that long hour he had caught not even the glimpse of man or of woman, and not a sound came floating across that little swale to lend him sweet assurance or bitter disappointment.

And yet—he looked in vain for the mute signal which had been agreed upon in case Cora should be forced for any reason to abandon her mountain home.

"All must be well, unless Flashy Fred has—but he was to the front, back yonder, easy enough!"

Alick thought of his narrow escape from hanging for the killing of Omaha Kid, but only for a few seconds; he was growing far too uneasy over the strange silence of Cora Ball.

Even if matters were so she could not come forth to meet her lover, surely she would find some means of letting him know how—

Then Alick gave a quick, gasping breath of intense relief and joy, for just then he caught sight of his beloved some little distance from the cabin, one hand shading her eyes as she peered through the gathering twilight toward his hiding-place.

"She sees it at last, the darling!"

True for him!

Barely pausing at the cabin door, Cora hastened down to and across the springbrook, and a few minutes later was recovering from that warm flood of kisses, leaning with half-closed lids against the manly bosom of her true lover.

"Tears, Precious?" murmured the detective, gently kissing them away. "Those devils haven't been abusing you, love?"

Cora quickly rallied, casting a half-nervous glance across toward the shack, although that was no longer visible, thanks to the change of position made by the Telegraph Detective.

"Devils they surely are, Alick!" she passionately avowed, giving a bit of a shiver as his strong arm clasped her closer. "Devils all, and Fred Hibbert the vilest one of the group!"

"What more evil has he been up to, Cora?"

"Against your dear life, Alick!"

"Is that all?" and the detective gave a short laugh, full of careless scorn. "So long as the overgrown cur doesn't trouble you—"

"But it has troubled me, Alick! Day and night I can't get rid of the horrible thought which—oh, Alick! If you would only go far away from here, beyond all danger from that dreadful creature!"

"Go with me, little lady, and I'll gladly resign all other hopes."

Now, as before when a like point arose, Cora roused with a start, calling both courage and reason to her aid.

McPherson smiled into her eyes, but she had sufficient will-power to deny him, shaking her head slowly as she spoke:

"No, not just that, Alick, for I know that your duty is—as it ought to be—first in your estimation, and—"

"There can be but one first, darling; and that position is filled by the dearest, brightest, sweetest little woman—"

A small brown hand closed lightly over his lips, and the sentence of praise died away in a lovely kiss.

Speaking hurriedly, like one who fears to grant time or chance for urging a plea to which her heart was only too willing to listen favorably, Cora told Alick of the das-

tardly suggestion made by Flashy Fred Hibbert, which she so fortunately succeeded in eavesdropping.

"I was not able to catch all that was said, even when I gained a hiding-place close to where they were talking," Cora added. "But I did hear sufficient to make my blood run cold!"

"Never mind that, now, pet," soothingly whispered Alick, his arms holding her closer than ever.

"But I do mind, and so must you, dear!" exclaimed the maiden, voice far from steady so intense was her emotion. "For that demon told Uncle Nat and the twins they must—must kill you!"

"Well, it's catching, first, remember, little lady!" lightly jested the detective, seeking to lessen her evident fears.

But Cora was not to be so readily diverted from her purpose.

Ever since hearing that dastardly scheme suggested by the Giant Train-wrecker, she had been able to think of nothing else, only kept from starting out in quest of her lover, with her warning of impending peril, by the thought that she knew not where to find him.

Now she poured forth her warning, repeating as nearly as possible every sentence let fall within her hearing that bright morning, making it perfectly clear that, while Flashy Fred was the originator of the vile scheme, both uncle and twins only too willingly fell in with his desires.

"He swore that you must be lured into a trap, and there disposed of for all time! And then—he said I would make a good bait for you!"

"A mighty sweet one, anyway!" jested McPherson, "sampling the sweets" an instant later. "I'd go through fire and brimstone for such a delicious bait, Precious!"

"Don't—don't try to make a jest of it, Alick! If you only knew how horribly I was tortured then, forced to listen without making so much as a single sound!"

"The devils! I'll pay 'em off for all that, sweetheart!"

"And ever since—when I could neither see you nor get you word of the vile plot! Oh, Alick, this sort of life is wearing me out!"

"If I might only take you away—far away from all this, my love! And I will, unless you positively forbid."

"I do—I feel that I must," whispered Cora, yielding yet resistant. "When your work is well done, then—then—"

"You will go with me, Cora? You will deny me no longer, then?"

"I will go with you, my love!"

For a brief space lips were busy, though words were few and far between.

Twilight was rapidly deepening into night, and a sound came to the ears of the lovers from the direction of the cabin.

"Never mind that or them, whichever it is, pet," impatiently whispered McPherson, as Cora stirred uneasily in his arms. "Yet a little longer, love, for there's no certainty when I can get off again."

"And that's just what I wished to say, Alick," her voice growing grave and intensely earnest as she added: "Promise me that you will not come here again; that you will not yield, even though it seems as if I was calling for you! Promise me, dear Alick?"

"Why, Precious?"

"I mean it all; you must promise me, Alick! Think! They said I was to be the bait for the death-trap! And they would forge or lie—Oh, Alick! promise me you will not come near this place again until all trouble is ended, all danger forever removed!"

"Unless you should need me, little lady, why—"

"Not even if such an appeal should come to you as though from me, Alick! Unless—unless—"

"Unless what, Precious?"

Cora hung her head in deep thought for nearly a minute, then her eyes lifted with a bright and loving light in their lustrous depths.

"Unless I really send the message to you, Alick!"

McPherson laughed, amusedly, in spite of himself; but Cora pouted out her charming lips for an instant, then added:

"This is not nearly so foolish as you may

flut'
 71 imagine, Alick, for—do you remember the day when you first—"
 "Did this?" deftly bending to rifle a lovely sweet!

A little paw tapped his ears, but the blow was not quite stunning!

"Not just that, silly, but the day when—Oh, you do know, Alick?"

"The day when you told me you loved me, pet?" whispered the lover.

"Yes—no—well, yes, then!" her blushes visible even by starlight.

"As though I could ever forget that blessed day and hour, Cora!"

"Wait; let me finish, you great bear! Well, then, no matter what sort of word or message may come to you as though from me, Alick, pay no notice whatever to it unless that day and hour are written down, if a note, or added by word of mouth if a messenger comes instead!"

"Those cruel men will surely try to trap you, dear, but so long as you are cautious; so long as you refuse to believe or obey any spoken or written message which lacks that sign— You will remember, Alick?"

"I will remember, sweetheart, and some of these days I'll try my level best to repay all your services," earnestly vowed the detective, moved far more deeply than he dared show on the surface just then.

Cora drew a long breath of relief, and having thus guarded against future trouble as she believed, the maiden gave herself up to a brief period of delightful communion; it could only be brief, for the evening was growing older, and she expected with each moment in passing to hear the surly or angry summons of her uncle or the twin cousins from the mountain shack.

Then, when even McPherson recognized the wisdom if not the necessity of parting for the time being, the Telegraph Detective spoke of less absorbing matters, telling Cora how surely ugly suspicions were veering toward the Pollocks, father and sons, in connection with the murder of Omaha Kid, and ending by asking her to let fall a warning word for the benefit of her erring relatives.

"Advise them from me to go into retirement until the storm can blow over," was his concluding advice.

Cora promised; then the lovers parted for the present.

CHAPTER XXIV

DETECTIVE ALICK SCORES A POINT.

"Isn't she just as near an angel as they make 'em, now-a-days?" the Telegraph Detective asked himself while picking his way through the tangled ground, facing without a murmur the long miles lying between himself and the mining-town of Mineral Point.

The night was decidedly cool for that time of year, but McPherson felt it not; he had food for thought sufficient to keep him warm had it been in mid-winter!

Surely never was mortal man blessed with so dear, sweet, brave and self-denying a girl as he!

"I could almost wish her a little less self-denying, though!" muttered Alick, with a half-rueful sigh. "If she'd only give one word, one weenty hint, even, that she wanted me to throw all this business over, I'd do it only too gladly—God bless her heart!"

And yet Alick knew that this very self-denial against which his lover-heart was rebelling just then, only added to the value of his brave little ally.

McPherson gave considerable thought to the revelation made by Cora Ball as to Flashy Fred's murderous schemes, for after what had already taken place he knew that the evil gang would never balk at murder in its foulest guise; all they needed was time and opportunity for dealing a blow and making sure work of it all.

Then, too, he had other food for thought, for only a small portion of what passed between the lovers had been set down here.

He had come to the rendezvous hoping Cora had learned something definite concerning the abducted couple, but only to meet with disappointment in that quarter as well.

If the Pollocks were posted, they took precious good care to keep all secret so far as Cora was concerned. Although little time had been wasted since that eventful

night, not a single actual clue had been won, up to the moment that mysteriously posted note of warning came to the hands of Jaffrey Zattell.

And that was so worded as to frighten even that iron-nerved speculator, and as a result Zattell forbade McPherson from taking any further steps in the matter without he granted definite permission.

In all probability Mr. Zattell passed the same word along to his other armed aides, although this was but mere conjecture on McPherson's part, since he did not closely fraternize with the more recent comers.

With all this as foundation for thought, little wonder that the Telegraph Detective's brain was very busy as he hurried along through the night, instinctively picking a pathway for himself where none was made to order; and it was mere chance (or providence?) that caused him to turn a glance to the left, just when and just where he could catch a bare glimpse of—what?

Instantly halting, Alick stared intently in that direction, then rapidly winked his eyes as though hoping thus to reproduce the illusion; for surely it could be naught more definite than one of those strange sparks of light which so frequently float across the human retina?

And yet—surely it looked like a far-away camp-fire!

Failing to distinguish aught as he stood, McPherson slowly and gradually moved backward, from side to side, until—there it was again!

"A fire, for a fact!" muttered the detective, once again the keenly alert professional. "Who'd be out here at such an hour? And—why?"

First looking well to his weapons in case of danger ahead, the Telegraph Detective moved cautiously off in that direction, keeping yonder tiny star of red light in view as perfectly as possible, yet losing sight of it for a second or two at a time when tree or bush interposed as a screen.

Before he could quite assure himself living souls were near the tiny camp-fire, McPherson caught sight of indistinct shapes which on nearer approach resolved themselves into a couple of goodly nags, saddled and bridled and ready for the road!

"That's getting down a little closer to business, for a scandalous fact!" Alick told himself, sinking lower to earth and making his approach still more cat-like so far as silence was concerned. "Where there's horses, look for riders! And—I'm going to see just what fer looking fellows those same riders are, too!"

Without alarming the intelligent creatures, McPherson crept near enough to feel fairly certain they were wholly unknown to his eyes, then he stole forward nearer yonder little camp-fire.

That was only a few short rods from where the animals were tethered, but a fringe of scrubby bushes and a few scattering trees in goodly measure concealed the one from the other.

So adroitly had the fire been located that its discovery by the keen-eyed detective had surely been a providential bit of luck.

And so Alick McPherson surely felt when, a minute later, he won a position from whence he could gain a tolerably fair view of two men who now stood nearly facing his hiding-place.

Only one face was fully exposed to his eager eyes, the ruddy glow falling fairly athwart those clear-cut, diabolically handsome features.

That was the face of a complete stranger, and McPherson passed it by for the moment, looking at the second figure; a figure only too readily recognized in spite of that facial covering of dark fabric.

"The big fellow's Flashy Fred Hibbert, easy enough," muttered the Telegraph Detective below his breath, hands clinching tightly in his absorbing interest. "I'd know him in heaven, if we were to meet there; and more than that can't well be said! But—who's his mate, now?"

A glimmer of the truth flashed upon the detective's busy brain, yet that seemed far too good news to prove true.

"If it is—if I only knew to a moral certainty!" muttered the keen watcher, gripping pistol-butt more keenly the while.

McPherson could make out that at least

a third party was there in the little fire-lit space, but as yet he could form no definite idea as to what or whom that last personage might be.

The tree-trunk to which Jaffrey Zattell was bound proved a perfect shield from the detective's position, and he dared not shift his position just then.

A cracking twig, a rustling leaf or bunch of dry grass might well betray his eavesdropping, and hoping for some important discovery, the detective crouched low, listening and looking intently.

But he was fated to disappointment in a certain degree, for the talking had come to an end for the present, and the mask whom he felt positive must be Flashy Fred Hibbert, was holding the dark-faced man in check, whispering swiftly and seemingly with effect.

For, a few seconds later, the two villains swung around and fell further away from the little camp-fire, leaving their bound captive and the disappointed detective there in close company.

McPherson waited and watched long enough to satisfy himself that this did not mean a final abandonment of that camp, but merely a withdrawal for a private consultation; and then he stole noiselessly around that tree-trunk far enough to distinguish the white hair and pale face of his employer, Jaffrey Zattell!

That was a shock to Alick, for his thoughts had never for an instant turned upon the capitalist, and for a little he hardly knew what step to take next.

That hesitation lasted but for a moment or two.

In the grip of Flashy Fred and such a running-mate as that precious villain would naturally select, Jaffrey Zattell was surely in imminent peril, and all other thoughts should be set aside in favor of his rescue.

So reasoned the detective, and he swiftly took action to suit.

Creeping close to the tree, from the rear, he whispered softly:

"Not a sound, for your life, Mr. Zattell! I'll save you, only—be quiet, if you love life!"

Then his keen-edged knife came into rapid play, severing those toughened coils without sound or warning which could possibly reach the ears of their consulting enemy.

McPherson heard the prisoner give a short, quick gasp, but no other sound escaped his lips until those coils fell noiselessly away. Then he huskily whispered:

"Who is it? You, McPherson?"

"Hist!" warned the detective, slipping around the tree far enough to place a silencing palm over those unsteady lips. "Come! the horses are just out yonder, and—for sake of your children not a sound!"

Thus effectually silenced the millionaire yielded to that guidance and almost ere he could realize what was happening, those strong yet kindly hands were deftly aiding him to climb into the saddle borne by the nearest of the two horses.

Slashing the halters as wasting less time, McPherson sprang lightly into a seat on the other animal, then caught the reins close up to the bit of the mount given Zattell, moving off at as silent a pace as might be there in the gloom.

All this took place with wonderful celerity, and yet the two men had hardly begun their retreat on horseback, when a savage roar and vicious oaths burst forth at the camp-fire.

"Come! it's for life, now!" sternly said the Telegraph Detective, as he urged their mounts on through the night at a reckless pace.

Those trampling hoofs guided the enraged schemers, and cursing savagely, the partners in crime rushed forward in mad pursuit, shooting as they came.

But the darkness and those flying targets made all such firing little better than a foolish waste of good ammunition; and the thumping, pounding, crashing strokes steadily receded, leaving the baffled villains to take out their furious rage in blasphemous tirades.

"Stop! Turn back and take that black-faced demon!" hoarsely cried Jaffrey Zattell, as soon as he could rally from that amazing rescue. "I command you, sir! Stop and—Yonder demon holds my poor children in his power, don't you understand?"

But McPherson paid no heed to his frantic words, gripping tightly that rein, forcing the good horse on through the night at what seemed a suicidal pace.

On, and still on, until their enemies were left far in the rear, not even their shots or their curses longer audible.

Then McPherson deemed it safe enough to slacken speed and picked out a smoother course, while Jaffrey Zattell raged and fumed, groaned and lamented by turns as he thought of his still free enemy.

He explained to McPherson who and what the fellow was, but Alick still held to his firm belief that in all he had acted for the best interests of both his employer and that employer's family in bonds.

"I couldn't have captured the fellow alive, sir, and if I had succeeded in downing them both—which means killing both—it would have been worse for your children: don't you see?"

"How could it be worse? My poor, little girly-girl!" groaned Zattell.

"It could very easily be worse, sir," declared McPherson, then set about proving it. "So long as Hibbert and that other rascal have full swing, they'll value the young people from a purely monetary point of view; but kill them or run them off, what follows?"

"Just this: they'll fall into even viler hands, and— Well, sir, you're a man of the world enough to imagine what would follow that!"

Zattell groaned, huskily, and for some distance rode on in silence.

Then McPherson elaborated his ideas, fairly well convincing the capitalist ere they came into sight of Mineral Point once more.

Just outside the town Alick called a halt, earnestly advising Mr. Zattell to give his ruthless enemy no further opportunity to trap him.

"Don't sleep a night alone. Don't take a step, even by day, without a keen and trusty guard watching over you, sir! Not for your own sake alone, but because with you likewise in their grip, those devils would have everything their own way. Is it a promise, sir?"

"I pass my word, Mr. McPherson, and add my heartfelt thanks!" huskily spoke the millionaire; then the two men parted for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DESPERATE STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

"You go take a walk round the block!"

With a gesture which he meant should be both dignified and impressive, Cyril Chatterton dismissed his armed guards for the time being, looking after the retreating knaves with owl's gravity.

It needed but a single glance to tell that the Man from Wall Street had been "hitting the bottle" heavily although in looks alone was his intoxication betrayed.

His color was unusually pale, and leaden circles surrounded his eyes. He looked particularly unhealthy, just then, and those who knew him best would have thought, if not said, the same thing: especially unhealthy for those luckless beings upon whom his evil passions should be vented!

Waiting until assured no curious eyes were upon his movements, Cyril Chatterton turned and entered the dingy little cavern which had been selected as prison cell for his valuable captives, giving a surly grunt and curse when he stubbed his toe against a protruding point of rock.

This was his first visit to brother and sister since leaving them in company with Flashy Fred, to hatch up a shrewd scheme to get Jaffrey Zattell into his evil clutches as well as the millionaire's children.

Neither Felicia nor Rodney was asleep, although the hour was quite late; but they had slumbered very little since falling into the hands of the train-wreckers, and never both at the same time.

Warned of intrusion by those grumbling curses, the prisoners were upon their feet when Chatterton came under the rays of their rude lamp, a ghoul's expression upon his face and a devilish grin curling back his lips as he looked upon the pale yet hardly terrified face of the girl whom he had sworn by all the powers of evil should become his wife.

As he gave a coarse, even brutal salutation, Chatterton hardly looked at the young man, evidently deeming him helpless to mar or to hinder, since Rodney had been kept in snug bonds ever since he unmasked the arch-villain.

If Chatterton had not been so deeply under the influence of his potations, he might have acted less rashly, and what followed might have been postponed, if not entirely averted; as it was he gave an unsteady lurch forward, an evil leer in his eyes, a vile speech upon his lips, as he strove to catch the maiden in his arms.

Felicia swiftly evaded that clutch, and as she fled behind her brother, Rodney sternly cried out:

"Back, you cur! Lay but the weight of a finger on this lady, and I'll kill you like a wolf!"

"Oh, go soak your head, boy!" coarsely retorted the ruffian, one hand against Zattell's breast to steady himself, its mate drawing back for a brutal blow which would have felled its recipient like a log.

But that stroke was never delivered as intended.

Rodney ducked and dodged, at the same instant throwing all his power into one effort; those bonds gave way and were shaken completely off before Cyril Chatterton could regain his balance.

And then, swift as fate and nearly as sure, the athlete from Yale sent in a blow straight from the shoulder, adding to it his own weight, making every ounce of weight and muscle count for all they were worth!

A prettier knock-down blow was never put on record, and Chatterton fell limply backward, but right there ended the rules of the ring.

Quick and almost viciously as ever panther sprung upon a helpless fawn, Rodney jumped after, lending his weight to the fall, gripping that sinewy throat with both hands the more surely to smother any outcry on the part of their enemy.

Felicia gave a low, quavering cry as she saw the two men "mix up," but then her natural spirit revived, and as Rodney followed up his advantage, the girl looked around in quest of a weapon of some—

Ha!

Snatching up a heavy chunk of water-worn quartz lying near by, Felicia sprung forward and offered it, quickly saying:

"Here, brother! Don't let him— Kill the brute, rather than worse come to you, Rod!"

Hardly realizing just what sort of action he was taking, Zattell caught at the rude weapon, swinging it around and against that black-crowned head with pitiless force.

No outcry, not even a groan or a moan; but those quivering limbs stretched out convulsively, then lay awfully still!

Rodney raised that stone, now marked with blood, ready to repeat his stroke in case of need; but now that the work was done, Felicia gave way after the true womanly fashion, giving a faint gasp as she clung to that avenging hand, murmuring:

"Don't—oh, Rodney, don't kill— Oh!"

Zattell let the rock fall, not through motives of pity or of remorse, but simply because he saw another blow would surely be superfluous.

He deftly unbuckled the broad belt of arms which encircled the silent man's middle, giving vent to a low, fierce exclamation as he saw the liberal supply of cartridges as well as the knife and brace of heavy revolvers belonging thereto.

Only a glance to make sure the guns were fully charged, then Rodney put on the belt, muttering as he did so:

"Quiet, sis! It's our good chance, now, unless—we've just got to get out of here, after this bit of work!"

Holding one of the confiscated weapons ready in hand, the young man stole silently along that dark passage, looking and listening all the more intently as he drew nearer the place of exit.

He knew it was customary to keep an armed guard on duty before the mouth of the cavern; but he knew, too, that on more than one occasion Chatterton had dismissed his men while paying his precious prisoners a more or less ceremonious visit.

If such should prove to be the case now!

A couple of minutes later Rodney felt fairly well assured that such was indeed the case, and for the first time permitting himself to indulge in actual hopes of escape, he turned to rejoin his sister.

"I'm here, Rod," came in a whisper just as he nearly ran against the object of his quest. "Oh, dear, what shall we do, now? That terrible man!"

"I'd ought to make sure he's past giving us any further trouble—I really ought to hit him again before we go!"

Felicia barely succeeded in smothering in its birth a scream of mingled joy and incredulity; but as Rodney told her the way to escape really appeared to be clear, she clung to his free arm and tremblingly begged to be taken away at once—for another minute of captivity would surely kill her!

There was a bit of feminine hysterics in this, but it frightened her brother into yielding at once, lest she unwittingly ruin all through calling dangerous notice their way ere they could fairly begin their flight.

Although neither brother nor sister knew as much, then, everything was favorable to their successful flight.

The knaves on duty as sentinels knew that their chief was inside, and their orders were to guard against any persons getting in without the regular signs and words.

The special guards whose tour of duty took in the cavern-entrance, had been dismissed by Chatterton himself, and that arch-villain was lying in a little pool of his own blood, either dead or thoroughly *hors de combat* for the present.

And so, crouching low and taking each step with a caution born of their own fears, brother and sister finally succeeded in winning their way through those lines, then pressed on more rapidly through the night, knowing little whither they were going, and caring not much more, so long as they might keep out of the evil clutches of the outlaws.

It was the weaker who kept urging the more powerful on, now, and for long hours Felicia kept Rodney hastening through the gloom of night, paying no heed to the many obstacles which barred their passage, keeping on and on and still onward through those wild recesses, only coming to a halt when nature refused to do any more.

That was in a fairly comfortable nook where a little brook purled along its stony way; and with a cool drink alone for bodily support, the fugitives settled down in quiet, if not in comfort.

Worn out by her mental unrest through all those weary hours of captivity, even more than by her recent physical exertions, Felicia quickly dropped off to sleep, nestling lovingly up against her brother.

Not so Rodney.

He far more more accurately judged the perils which still surrounded them, and was far too troubled to think of sleep, much as his bodily system required repose.

True, they had slipped through the evil fingers of Cyril Chatterton, and he was fairly well armed for a fight against recapture; but where were they, now?

Which way ought they to turn in order to regain civilization, much less relatives or friends?

How long would it be before Chatterton and his whelps would come howling along their trail, to capture or to slay?

"To kill, maybe, but not recapture; never that, you hell-bound!"

With the first rays of the new day, Zattell softly arose, leaving Felicia still peacefully sleeping, his mind bent on procuring some sort of food for breaking their fast, knowing how hungry the maiden would be on awaking after their desperate dash for liberty.

Although Rodney did not dare move far away from that spot without his sister, temptation quickly presented itself in the shape of a brace of "fool hens" which were flushed from the brookside, only to alight upon a low-limbed tree hard by.

The shot seemed a certain one, even with his pistols; but Zattell paused to count the possible costs before firing.

Would the report carry to the ears of their ruthless enemies? Would it not be wiser to fast than to tempt Providence—

Then his doubts took speedy flight as one of the grouse showed symptoms of betaking itself off, and as the pistol barked, one of the

fluttered down to earth, and their breakfast was provided!

That shot roused Felicia, but ere she could get thoroughly scared, Rodney rejoined her with both grouch and an explanation.

A brief scout about the place convinced the two that they ran no serious risk of immediate discovery by the enemy, and with far lighter hearts than they had carried for days, they fell to work making preparations for their first meal *al fresco*.

Felicia gathered material for a fire, while Rodney quickly dressed the grouse for broiling over the coals; and if sundry very essential articles were missing, so much the merrier—for once in a way!

Fortunately the young couple were ravenously hungry, else that impromptu meal would hardly have relished, *sans* salt, *sans* flavor, *sans* pretty near everything save smoke and ashes and a general mixture of burnt meat and raw flesh!

But it was their first meal after captivity, and that made amends for all else!

While so feasting, Felicia prattled merrily about their father, and how greatly overjoyed he would be as they pounced in upon him without word or warning!

Rodney smiled and laughed as in duty bound, but he was far from feeling as joyous at heart, knowing as he did how utterly at sea he was, so far as having any definite notion of their present whereabouts.

They were in the foot-hills; so much he knew, but he might as well know nothing, so far as utility went.

They had just finished discussing the grouse, when Felicia, who had hastened to wash and wipe her dainty little paws, gave a sharp cry of apprehension, then sprang quickly toward her brother, crying out:

"Look, oh Rod! There they are, now!"

Rodney caught sight of advancing figures, and whipped out his guns.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FRESH PERIL FOR THE FUGITIVES.

BEYOND a doubt they had been seen first, for the instant those warlike preparations were begun, one of the two hulking fellows threw up an empty hand, calling out in distinct tones:

"Easy, pardner! Flag o' truce fer—don't shoot, stranger!"

"Who and what are you, then?" sternly demanded Zattell, still holding his weapons ready for swift use.

"Hafe white an' free born, boss!" briskly came the reply in regulation form which says so much and means so little. "Looks rt o' like ye'd done got lost, don't it?"

The two men were leisurely coming closer while, grinning broadly, seemingly the best natured fellows in the wide world, asking so harmless that, despite his caution, Rodney could not take them for dangerous enemies.

Clearly they were natives, looking, acting like thoroughbred mountaineers; and already began to fancy a way out of the wilderness was opening before them!

The two men were almost ludicrously alike in size, dimensions, looks, walk and even dress, and instinctively one would set them down for twins at first sight.

So Rodney Zattell decided now, but as he had never met, nor ever so much as heard of, the Pollock Twins, he was none the wiser now.

Felicia likewise betrayed strong interest in this oddly matched couple, and in a whisper urged Rodney to beg their aid in rejoining their mourning parent.

Their genial grin growing still broader as they took swift note of that rudely cooked akfast, Luke and Silas seemed quite content to let that keen scrutiny go on, time without end; only a sudden thought seemed strike one of the twins right where his nip of curiosity was located, and he gave a sharp grunt, then blurted out:

"Blamed ef I don't reckon she am, fur a t! I say—boss!"

"Well, sir, what is it?"

"Mebbe you hain't them as somebody hes t an' is a-lookin' fur in a terrible sweat nur thin', hain't ye now?"

"I don't understand—"

"A gal an' a boy! That's what they said, yhow! An' tuck off in a holy rush the ght she spit a bit o' wet! An' you—eh?"

Felicia gave a low exclamation at this, but Rodney checked her in time, shrewdly wishing to feel his way a bit further before placing too full trust in these rough diamonds.

"Can you guide us to the railway, gentlemen? The station—What is it called, where?"

"Silver Leaf—whar a gal an' a boy was done snuck away in the night?" eagerly asked one of the twins, both leaning a bit closer as their interest in the case grew deeper.

"Yes! Will you guide us there—for pay, of course?"

Instead of immediately replying, the two men turned grave, looking at each other in silence, then slowly shaking heads as though moved by the same wire being touched.

"I'll pay you for your trouble, gentlemen," urged Rodney, hastily. "Any price in reason, although I don't happen to have any cash about my person, just at present."

That came as a happy thought in case these mountaineers should be tempted of the devil.

"Oh, 'tain't so mighty much the money, sir, but—Waal, ef we knowed jest who you mought be, sir, an' knowed them ornery devils—"

"Tell them, brother!" urged Felicia, unable to contain her impatience longer. "They are honest—I can see that, myself! Tell them all, and then I know they will aid us in getting safely back to our poor father!"

Rodney was almost ready to make a free breast of it all, of his own accord, and now he quickly explained what had befallen them, and just how it chanced that they were out here lost among the foot-hills.

The twins listened with undisguised interest, but their eyes met at brief intervals; their shaggy heads nodding significantly as often; and when young Zattell ceased his story, one of the twins made reply:

"That's jest what we was thinkin' of, all the time, boss! An' now—eh, Luke?"

"That's mighty nigh what, Sile!"

"Thar ye hev it, then, sir!" with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But—surely you will guide us safely out of these hills?"

"Ef sayin' so was the doin' of it, boss; but that hain't the plum' p'int of it, ye see!"

"Wish't was!"

"We're jest two lone critters—"

"Whar they's a hull gob!"

"An' though we mought snuck through our own selves, bein' men, so to speak, whar'd be the show of gittin' a leddy like her through; eh?"

"Unless we was to hide 'em out, fu'st, then fetch a passel o' boys over from the Pint, Sile?"

"Waal, now, I never tuck a weenty think at it that way, Luke!"

"'Course it'd be resky; heap-sight resky, too! But—I say, Sile!"

"Keep on a sayin' of it, Luke!"

"Thar's the Lion's Crawl, don't ye 'member?"

"Waal, now I will ber-durned!" fairly exploded the other twin, tearing off his hat and tossing it high in the air, to be met by the toe of a monstrous boot as it came fluttering down again. "Lord, ma'am, an' you, sir; takes Luke fer to put on the fine tetches; yes it do, now!"

Through all this swift interchange of words, brother and sister stood by in silence, striving to comprehend, but with no very brilliant success.

Now Rodney Zattell spoke up, still befogged as to understanding:

"Then you will guide us to town, or at least to the railway line, gentlemen?"

Another swift interchange of looks, then Luke nodded to Silas, who thereupon acted as spokesman for both.

"Waal sir, an' you, ma'am, we'll do 'most anything in reason fer to please ye all two both; but—thar's a turrible sight o' resk into it!"

"All of which shall be heavily paid for, depend upon that!"

"That's all right, boss, an' money wouldn't cut so mighty much of a figger, only—waa! we two hain't plenty 'nough fer to git you both safe out o' this yer' peck o' troubles. Eh, Luke?"

"That's what! But ef we kin hev time fer to fetch help—Sile?"

"Which is what I'm gittin' at, too! Will you 'gree to *cache* out a weenty bit, then, boss, while t'other of us goes to fetch a passle big 'nough fer to fight a hole through, ef them blamed train-wreckers should try to jump ye clean back ag'in?"

"How long would we have to wait? How long before you could raise a sufficient force?"

A quick squint toward the early sun, then the fellow made reply:

"Waal, I could go and come ag'inst three o'clock, ef nothin' didn't turn up to upset my pians. Eh, Luke?"

"Make it fo', an' I'm backin' of ye up, Sile!"

"Thar ye hev it, then, boss! One o' us'll go fer help, the other 'ne'll show ye to a hole in the rocks we call the Lion's Crawl—"

"'Long of ketchin' a couple o' mount'in lines crawlin' through, ye want to know," generously explained the other twin.

"Say yes—do say yes, brother!" urged Felicia, in a whisper.

So it was decided upon, and while Silas Pollock hurried off on his supposed mission of generous peril, Luke guided the unsuspecting brother and sister over to the low-mouthed cavern where wild beasts had found occasional home and shelter through uncounted ages.

While on their way Luke "stuffed" his company with terrible tales concerning the lawless train-wreckers, road-agents, foot-pads and cut-throats in general with which those mountains were literally over-run.

And through it all he took particular pains to exalt the courage of himself and brother for even venturing to cross the will of those atrocious villains; 'twould be a death of prolonged torture should they ever fall alive into those evil clutches and their share in this escape be so much as suspected.

Meanwhile Silas Pollock was hurrying at top speed for the mountain shack where he confidently expected to find Nathan in waiting; and as he sped along, broad grins and malicious chuckles marked his progress.

For, as no doubt the reader has divined, the twins were playing a double game on the chance of making a double winning; if they could get better pay for guiding the brother and sister into safety than through betraying them into the hands of their worst enemies, well and good!

And so the hulking twin was betrayed into unusual exertions, and only slackened his pace when he came in sight of his cabin home, where Nathan Pollock was suspiciously watching his coming, rifle in hand.

"It's mighty dug-gun lucky the glint o' sunshine ketched ye jest as it did, ye fool boy!" gruffly spoke the mountaineer, lowering the hammer of his muzzle-loader. "Next time think what's which, durn ye!"

But Silas was far too highly elated to care aught for such a reproof, and as briefly as possible told of the marvelous discovery made by Luke and himself that morning so early.

"Be durned ef I kin see how they *could* git away!"

"But it's them, to a dead moral, Pap! The fool' boy said as how it was, an' so—waa! we stuffed 'em ram-jam full o' guff 'bout the turrible resk o' guidin' 'em through 'thout hev'in' a ole army 'long fer to do the fightin'—haw! haw! haw!"

A pale, scared face showed itself for an instant at the rear door, then Cora Ball settled down to listen, hand over heart to still its mad throbbings as she felt how all-important this discovery might prove.

With huge gusto Silas told all that took place, explaining how Luke had been left behind to guide the fugitives to the "Lion's Crawl," and there act as guardian until an irresistible force could be collected and brought to their assistance.

"An' now, how kin we git the cream off o' both sides the pan o' milk, Pap?" asked Silas, licking his thick lips in anticipation.

Breathlessly Cora listened, noting down every word let fall, firmly resolved to foil those evil plans; but how could she, alone, poor girl?

CHAPTER XXVII.

DRIVING A HARD BARGAIN.

NOTHING but an abnormally thick or tough skull kept life from going out forever when Cyril Chatterton received that savage stroke at hands of Rodney Zattell.

As it was, the leader of the kidnapers was most effectually "put to sleep" for several hours, and even after contriving to give the alarm to his knaves, he lost more valuable time in recovering his bodily powers.

But once on the road to revival, Chatterton "crowded matters" with savage zeal, turning out his entire force with improvised torches to hunt for and pick up the trail, while a number of picked men were sent on long the more likely lines in hopes of stumbling upon the game.

Unfortunately for the complete success of his plans Chatterton had looked for general "toughness" rather than specialists, and he felt scant confidence in his ruffians as trailers through the darkness and over a stony, barren tract of ground.

Tightly bandaging up his own cracked crown the arch-villain left his men at work for the most part, with strict commands to capture their game no matter what the cost to themselves, and with a select trio he struck out on his own hook.

Unfortunately for his side as he now felt, neither Nathan Pollock nor the twins happened to be at the general rendezvous, and in hopes of fairly running the fugitives down by their woodcraft, Chatterton made all possible speed to that lone mountain shack.

So much time had been lost that the day was well advanced when he caught his first glimpse of the cabin, but it was with a peculiarly savage thrill running through his veins that he saw at least the elder Pollock was at home.

Chatterton hardly looked himself as he put in an appearance, his head bandaged, his cheeks still marked with little trickles of dried blood, his garments showing rough usage; but neither father nor son apparently took note of aught as the "boss" came unsteadily up to their front door.

"I want you—get a hustle on!" bluffly cried out the chief, as he leaned against a doorpost, short of breath for the moment.

"I want to know!"

"Devil's to pay, and no pitch hot! Come, man, there's no time to waste in chin-music! Business and I'll pay you bigger wages than you ever dreamed of earning before!"

Uncle Nathan shot a yellow stream past the strongly excited chief with unerring aim at a buzzing humblebee, while Silas yawned until it looked as though the roof was coming off his head.

Chatterton gave a bit of a start at this, looking keenly from face to face, a suspicion of the truth striking him then and there.

"You know something of what's happened, or your faces lie!" he exclaimed quickly, "You haven't—Where are they, then?"

"Whar is which, an' what mought be who, boss?" lazily drawled the veteran, leaning against the opposite post.

"Those fools—they gave us the slip, last night, and—you've either seen or heard of them, Pollock?"

"Who says I hev?"

"Haven't you, then?"

Uncle Nathan looked across toward his hopeful, who sent back an indolent grin by way of answer.

"Hev we see'd ar'ythin' of 'em, Sile, boy?"

"Waal, that pends sort o' how ye come fer to look at it, Pap. Ef she was wu'th seein', mebbe we did, but ef no money into it—what's the use in bein' to extry trouble?"

Chatterton straightened up at once, recognizing the manner of men he had now to treat with, but at the same time feeling a thrill of savage hope that all would end well for his hopes.

Surely these fellows must have not only seen the fugitives, but had a fast grip over them as well!

"I said I'd make it higher wages than you ever earned in ten-fold the same length of time," he repeated, with enforced calmness.

"Wind's heap cheap, eh, Sile?"

"While it calls fer good money to buy whisky, Pap!"

"That's what's the matter!"

"You can wade in whisky up to your necks, if you like!" impatiently cried Chatterton, flinging forth a nervous arm. "Only earn it first!"

"How kin we airn sech a pile, boss?"

"Show me where you've got my game in safe-keeping, of course!"

"Who toleye we done ketched it, boss?"

"Game you wasn't keen 'nough fer to hold, with a hull gang fer to help hold yer grip, too!" drawled the twin, with a sleepy, malicious leer.

"Where are they, curse you? If I have to—[Come, men, be sensible, and at least half-way white! Don't make me cut up too mighty rusty, for I'm in none too sweet a temper as it now stands."

Uncle Nathan reached one long arm inside the door, bringing his "pea-rifle" into fair view, his lantern jaws moving a bit more rapidly on his huge quid.

The twin hitched a business-looking "navy" a bit further around his hip, and his sleepy smile began to fade out, even as the fire deepened in his little eyes.

Cyril Chatterton was never set down for a fool, and sorely upset though he had been by the recent events, he quickly saw how rashly he had set to work, and how surely he had better undo his false step.

"Steady, all! I'm not here to quarrel with you, Pollock, and I am ready to pay you full price for all the work you may perform. So—in one word: can you turn those two young fools over to my keeping, again?"

A swift interchange of looks, then Uncle Nathan made answer:

"Waal, boss, thar hain't nary thing I've got that I wouldn't sell ef a f'ar price was to be shuck into the face o' me. An' so—what mought you call a f'ar price like this; eh?"

"Set your own figures, to cut it short as possible, Pollock."

"Waal, boss, I was jest sort o' thipkin'—ef a critter was to git paid like he'd orter—an' you didn't 'low 'twas too big a pile fer a big streak o' luck—"

"Which they was head-up-an'-tail-over-the-dasher fer town when we fu'st headed of 'em off, ye want to know!" cut in Silas, eagerly.

"An' countin' of all the times which we've done hard work fer no pay 'tall, why—eh, Sile?"

"That's what's the matter with Hanner, Pap!"

"Can you turn both girl and young fellow over to me, first?"

"Waal, I jest reckon we mought, ef so be—"

"And how soon could you give me full possession, Pollock?"

"Waal, now, 'pears like mebbe—kipple hours, then!"

"All right, and I agree to pay you every dollar you exact as reward for so doing, in cold cash, just as soon as I have those two persons fairly in my possession once more," sharply declared the arch-conspirator, striking right at the nubbin of the matter rather than waste any more valuable time.

"That's straight goods, is it, boss?"

"Straight as a string, Pollock."

"Call her a whack, an' putt her right thar!"

Hand met hand, and a close grasp followed. This ceremony had to be repeated by Silas as well, after which Uncle Nathan named his figures; small enough when the immense stake Chatterton was playing for came into consideration, yet large enough to make even that reckless spender wince for the moment.

Still he knew he must grin and submit or frown and fare worse. He had come to fairly appreciate these mountaineers by this time, and acted wisely in not holding out for more reasonable terms.

As matters stood now, Pollock took him on trust, while further haggling might have led to a demand for payment on the nail, before the "goods" were even shown, much less turned over.

Having reached an amicable understanding, the mountaineers at once set off through the foot-hills, guiding Chatterton to the wild beast den locally known as the "Lion's Crawl," where they felt well assured Luke would have their precious game carefully "rouned up."

While on their way, they were joined by several of the search-party, to one of which Flashy Fred had allied himself, meeting them by mere chance as he was making toward the secret rendezvous.

While on the way Silas gleefully explained how a lucky chance had thrown the fugitives into their power, and then went on to tell how thoroughly they had "stuffed" brother and sister with their fearful tales of

outlawry and brigandage, until they had been only too willing to lie perdu while one of their noble allies was sent off post-haste to enlist an army for their safe removal to civilization.

"Blamed ef I've run up ag'inst so mighty much fun sence I ketched the eetch!"

"Unless the youngster smoked you first, and so played it low down to split you up, I've known of such tricks," grimly commented Flashy Fred, who seemed in a far less sanguine mood than was his custom.

Could it be a shadow from the future?

Silas fairly hooted at such a preposterous idea as that, and confidently predicted a blissful ending to the adventure, from their point of view, of course.

By the time the party came within fair rifle range of the Lion's Crawl, or the narrow cavern to which Luke Pollock offered to conduct the fugitives, their numbers had swelled to nearly a round score, and with no actual fears of failure as to the end, Cyril Chatterton was already outlining his plans for the immediate future to Flashy Fred.

Then, just as they came out upon a fairly clear and level stretch of ground in front of a low, rocky ridge, a sharp challenge rung forth from some place not far ahead, bringing the whole party instantly to a halt.

"Who is it? Oh, your son, of course, Pollock!" exclaimed Chatterton, flashing a keen glance ahead. "Just hail him and say it's all right enough, and—"

"It's blamed sight nighder all wrong, though!" fairly snorted the old man, as he sprung for cover. "That hain't my boy Luke, wuss luck!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DETECTIVE ALICK IN CLOVER.

IN fear and trembling lest she be discovered listening, yet feeling that she must learn all, Cora Ball crouched down there by the kitchen door until she had learned the very worst: that the young couple in whom Alick McPherson felt so powerful an interest had leaped from the frying-pan, only to fall into the fire.

She had no difficulty in following that talk, familiar as she was with the surroundings of her mountain home; and then, when she knew for certain that the brother and sister had been lured by the twins into a snare from which escape unaided was well-nigh impossible, her blood fairly boiled and she inwardly registered a vow to chance all peril rather than permit wrong to triumph over right.

Fearing to lose too much precious time lest she be unable to reach the Lion's Crawl before her uncle and cousin, Cora crept silently away from the door before the miser's plot was fairly arranged.

Still, she knew enough to feel positively naught save evil could come to the young couple unless—

"Oh, if Alick was only here, now!"

Wistfully the poor girl looked across the cedar tree from whence the detective was wont to telegraph his presence and a desire for an interview with his charming ally, but the dusky green top was unmarked by dead cross-branch.

That was proof sufficient that Alick was not in waiting, and Cora felt that she must depend upon her own resources.

She hurried away toward the distant retreat, having formed no certain plans as yet, but still resolved to warn the fugitives of this new peril, no matter what the cost to herself—and right well she knew how dangerous either twin could grow when crossed in a pet scheme.

"Luke may murder me, but I'll never no, never permit him to so shamefully tray those poor people!"

And then, as though to reward her for a generous resolve, a low, surprised, yet lighted cry came to the maiden's ears; and as she turned to recognize face and figure even as she already recognized voice, Cora was tight folded in the arms of her gallant lover, Alick McPherson!

It proved to be a meeting by chance, although both looked upon it as truly predestined when there was time and breath for explanation.

McPherson had been out on a general prospecting tour, hoping rather vaguely that he might stumble across some signs of the train-wreckers or of the kidnapers, unl-

both should prove to be one and the same evil gang.

So far his quest had been wholly without reward, but now—he made sure of one more sweet payment, for luck!

And then his blood fairly thrilled as he listened to the marvelous story Cora had to narrate.

Truly the hand of fate lay in it all!

To think that the prisoners should effect their own escape so far as winning clear of the lawless gang, then to stumble across the Pollock Twins of all men!

And then, after the twins had agreed in secret to sell the ones who appealed to them for aid and succor, to have the vile plot overheard by Cora Ball, who hastened away to let fall a generous word of warning, meeting by the wayside the man of all men who could now be of the most valuable service to her!

"A volume of romance all in itself!" declared the Telegraph Detective, as he promptly paid that sweet debt once more, possibly imagining he had omitted the important ceremony before.

"If it does not turn out to be a tragedy!" murmured Cora, uneasily. "If Luke should so much as suspect the part I am playing now!"

This dread promptly brought the detective to the fore, relegating the lover to the rear for the time being.

"You say you know where this place is, Cora?"

"The Lion's Crawl? Yes, I know the spot well, Alick."

"And you can give me directions explicit enough to enable me to find the place without making a boggle of it?"

"I can show you, better, Alick; only—promise me you will not get into a fight with Luke, dear!"

"Not if he'll show his good sense by running away before I can close in, little woman," lightly answered McPherson. "Of course you wouldn't have me do the running, Cora?"

"No, but—"

The lover returned long enough to steady those suddenly grown tremulous lips, then McPherson persisted in his questions.

Yes, Cora believed she could direct him to the Lion's Crawl without any serious doubt, but—wouldn't it be better for her to show him?

And so it was finally arranged, the lovers hastening on through the wooded hills, both eager to reach the point in view, pleasant though it was to walk thus in company with none to see, none to hear, naught to set their hearts fluttering save love and joyous anticipations for the near future.

"For that is just what it all will amount to, darling!" declared the detective, as he learned all Cora had to tell him. "If we can save Rodney and Felicia Zattell, as seems fairly assured, now, the whole secret of the train-wrecking and kidnapping crew must come out; and then my work in this quarter will quickly come to an end! And—can you guess what will follow, darling?"

A shy glance, a pair of blushing cheeks, a kiss and an embrace!

Yet more than fair progress was made toward the Lion's Crawl by the lovers, and when Cora gave warning that the distance was now but a comparative trifle, the question arose as to how the Pollock Twin might be caught off his guard the surest.

Then the good luck of Cora's knowing all about that curious retreat was made evident, and under her direction and guidance, Alick McPherson fell to work in good earnest, having strong hopes of success.

Instead of openly approaching the cavern from its front, where one could count on little or no cover for at least a hundred yards, Cora explained how the cave might be entered from the rear, the opening passing entirely through that grim ridge of rocks; whence the peculiar title given the den.

Not daring to lose more precious time in trying to make sure the trio were within the cavern, the lovers kept out of sight from that one entrance, then scaled the ridge and descending the other side, came upon the second adit, nearly concealed by a luxuriant growth of vines and scrubby bushes.

Here McPherson begged Cora to wait while he ventured in alone, but this the maiden refused to hear to, and insisted upon acting as

guide for her lover to the end, let that be what it might prove.

And so it was; Cora entered first, with Alick following close to her heels, one hand lightly clasping hers, as the darkness grew complete.

Before the narrow and winding passage was finished, McPherson admitted the maiden's wisdom in so persisting, for he would have lost much precious time, if not his way as well.

Presently a low, dull sound came from ahead, and pausing, Cora gave warning that they were now very near the main cavern, where both friends, and at least one sturdy enemy was to be looked for.

"For my sake, dear, be cautious!" Cora permitted herself to say; any more she dared not attempt, just then.

"And you promise me to keep well back, darling?" murmured the detective, stealing a warm kiss, which was as ardently returned. "I'll have no serious trouble, pet, for there's only one man to handle, and I can do him up without more than half trying."

"Unless—if the stranger should mistake you for an enemy?"

"I'll look out for that, never fear, precious. Now—keep well back and out of danger, my heart of hearts!"

Doubtless it was foolish to waste so much time in repeated warnings, but dear though success was to him as a professional sleuth, still dearer by far was that same brave little woman!

Then, feeling that his weapons were ready to his grip in case he should be obliged to resort to such stern measures, although he counted confidently on winning the game without any bloodshed, McPherson crept noiselessly forward, pausing again when at the inner edge of the rude retreat, fairly well lighted up from without, for eyes so long in utter darkness.

He saw two strangers to himself, and at once recognized them from the description given by Jaffrey Zattell. And just beyond he distinguished the tall, gaunt, muscular shape of one of the Pollock Twins: Luke, as he now knew, although he could never have named the man with certainty if left to no aid save his own eyesight.

Pollock was just encouraging his guests with a hope that his brother would soon return with an armed escort strong enough to insure their safe journey through all other perils to the railway station or Mineral Point; when the detective leaped forward, striking with clubbed revolver as he came.

That aim was true and the blow strong, yet too much tempered with mercy for at once "putting to sleep" such a tough customer as one of the Pollock Twins.

Luke staggered, blindly, but gave a curse and tried to jerk forth a deadly weapon; but Alick leaped upon him, casting him to the stony floor as he sharply called out:

"I'm a friend, Zattell, from your father! Don't strike or shoot until I can—"

Then Cora came to the rescue, fairly catching Rodney in her arms so anxious was she lest harm come to her hero.

Half stunned though he was by that blow, Luke Pollock gave the detective a tough fight for victory, and when he finally applied a pair of steel bracelets to those wrists, McPherson held that particular one of the Pollock Twins in much higher estimation than ever before.

By this time Rodney Zattell was ready to take a hand in, thanks to the hurried explanations of Cora Ball; but the worst was over, and Luke Pollock was fairly disposed of for the present.

After this was attended to, explanations on all sides were in order, and Rodney Zattell was finally made to realize how thoroughly he had been befooled by the Pollock Twins.

At first it seemed impossible, incredible, but as both Cora and Alick gave their assurance, and McPherson promptly backed up his account of himself by an exhibition of papers which were past doubting, the humiliating truth was finally admitted.

And then there was so much to ask, so much to tell, so vastly much to run over which could hardly be put aside even in such an emergency as this!

For one thing, McPherson must confirm his suspicions as to the alliance of train-wreckers with the kidnapping gang, and al-

so the fact of that bold outrage finding birth in a personal grudge against Jaffrey Zattell.

All this Rodney was able to tell the detective, while Cora and Felicia were cordially fraternizing, as it might be termed.

But then the question of what should be their first move arose, for having been given so positive a proof of lurking danger on all sides, Rodney felt worried over the future of his sister.

"I'd rather see her a corpse than fall into the clutches of that brutal demon, Cyril Chatterton!" he forcibly vowed.

"We'll get her safely to her father, never you fear," lightly declared McPherson, just as though the task was already performed; and yet another cruel disappointment was being prepared for them that very moment.

For Cora, who stepped to the cave entrance, just then caught sight of something which drew a low, frightened cry from her lips as she recoiled, clinging to her lover as she pantingly spoke:

"Oh, my love! they'll murder you! Allis lost, now!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

DOING HIS LEVEL BEST.

GIVING Cora a quick swing around and to the rear, Alick McPherson leaped to the cave-entrance guns in hand on the keen alert.

At a single glance he took in the situation, and even his nerve quailed a bit as he saw how terribly the odds were against them.

He saw more than a dozen sturdy fellows, all armed, all heading direct for the Lion's Crawl; and as he recognized the gaunt, stoop-shouldered mountaineer, Nathan Pollock, he could not doubt their evident purpose.

The party had already emerged from cover into the open, seemingly without a fear of alarming the human game they surely expected to find corralled by the other Pollock Twin.

One swift glance, then the Telegraph Detective called out in stern challenge:

"Halt, there! You're toeing the dead-line, now, and I'll shoot if you attempt to cross it without permission!"

A start and a sudden clustering at this unexpected greeting, then McPherson saw old Pollock duck his head and skurry for shelter with almost ludicrous activity.

Silas was nearly as quick, and then the detective brought up his guns as he recognized other foes, even more to be feared.

But the alarm had been taken, and without exception one and all the company was breaking for cover, by no means the last among them all being Flashy Fred Hibbert and yonder white-bandaged gentleman whom the detective instinctively fixed upon as the Man from Wall Street, Cyril Chatterton.

Shooting under such circumstances would have savored strongly of chance work, and so Alick held his hand, knowing that to burn powder now would almost certainly fetch yonder whole squad raging to the charge, and he had thoughts for others than himself, now.

It was like a transformation scene in a pantomime, but McPherson saw nothing in it to laugh at, unfortunately.

And yet, he could not help telling himself, better by far to meet such an enemy here where they had the advantage of shelter, than out in the open where mere numbers must carry the day.

The detective was granted barely time enough in which to form these thoughts, then a harsh voice made itself heard from the edge of the open without:

"Who and what are you, in yonder? Judging from your talk—who are you, I ask?"

"An officer of the law, performing his sworn duty," quickly replied McPherson, knowing that his identity must speedily become known, even if it was not already.

"That devil, Alick McPherson!" he heard another voice ejaculate, in tones of blended surprise and vicious disgust.

"Yes, I am Alick McPherson, an officer of the law in the performance of my sworn duty," emphasized the Telegraph Detective, like one who was determined to leave no room for mistakes. "And whoever interferes with me in that duty, does so at his or their own peril!"

"Oh, fan me with a brick!" jeered one of the privates.

"You'll run up against something tougher to chew upon than a brick, gentlemen. I don't hanker for a row with your gang, but if I'm bothered in any way, shape or manner, I'll shoot—and I'll shoot to kill!"

"There you have fair warning, one and all. Go a little slow before you fly right in the face of it, gentlemen!"

"To hear him crow, you'd take him for a genuine game, instead of a dunghill!" jeered that shrill-pitched voice once more.

Still, it was evident that this bold front caught the gang somewhat aback, and for a few seconds silence reigned without the cavern.

Then a readily recognizable voice made itself heard to those inside the Lion's Crawl:

"Who is it you've arrested, McPherson?"

"Never mind, so long as your turn has not come round, Hibbert! I've ample warrant for all I've done, and if you're crazy enough to even dream of bucking against the law as represented by me—well, I've an armed force here strong enough to make some of you fellows sup sorrow with a mighty long spoon!"

Somehow this did not sound so much like vainglorious boasting, coming from those lips; but before the grim speech could take full effect, a loud voice followed from the Lion's Crawl:

"It's a lie! Thar hain't but two—"

The stentorian voice of Luke Pollock, coming just when it could work the most harm!

Swift as thought Rodney Zattell sprang upon the knave, grasping his hairy throat with both hands, effectually cutting off the rest of that warning sentence; but the harm was already done.

Their fears of a heavy force being set at rest by that shout, or possibly encouraged by the belief that they had at least one powerful ally inside the works, the lawless gang broke cover with a shout, rushing toward the Lion's Crawl as though they meant to carry all before them at a single dash.

But the victory was not to be won so easily, for Alick McPherson at once opened fire from the Lion's mouth, sending his lead where he thought it would do the most good, not firing at random "into the brown" as so many men will when hard pressed, but picking his man as coolly as he might his bird over point of setter or pointer.

Alick was a fair shot, yet no marvel, and not every one of his bullets found its billet in living flesh; but one burly knave flung aloft both arms, then pitched heavily to earth, dead ere his length was fairly measured, while a couple of others yelled and cursed in acute pain of more or less severe wounds.

It was a hasty charge, and fully as swift a re-pulse; for, like one man the gang recoiled, then broke for the nearest cover.

"That's just a sample!" clearly shouted the Telegraph Detective, striking while the iron was hot. "Come again without invitation, and I'll begin shooting to count!"

The brisk little skirmish was over before Rodney Zattell could jump up from his half-strangled charge, and betake himself to the pistols taken from Cyril Chatterton; whereat the gallant young fellow seemed a considerable bit provoked.

"You rush things so awfully fast, don't you know, Mr. McPherson!"

"I only wish I could rush things; yourself and the ladies, for instance—clear over the range to safety!"

The detective spoke as he looked, just now; gloomy and doubtful, it not actually despondent.

"Oh, you and I can easily hold the fort," declared Rodney, handling his guns more like an expert than a novice. "They can't come in here faster than two abreast, and we're good for double that number."

"You forget the back entrance!"

"I was just going to speak of that, Alick," eagerly whispered Cora, drawing close to the side of her lover. "Why can't we slip out that way before—Oh, if they should try to get in by that way, Alick!"

"They know of the double entrance, then, you think?"

"I know uncle and Silas does, and maybe—But if we hurry, Alick?"

"We've got to hurry, but that isn't to say—Mr. Zattell?"

"On deck, sir!"

"You must escort the ladies through the Crawl and away by the other opening, then make the best possible speed over to the railway line, or else to Mineral Point. Cora can guide you to either place."

"With you, never without, Alick!" cried the maiden, her arm clinging to his stalwart form.

"Ditto to ditto, friend! You've gotten into this scrape trying to serve my sister and myself; now—"

"No talk!" almost harshly interrupted the detective, pushing the young man back, and then gently but firmly relaxing Cora's arm. "It's our only chance, and that will surely fail unless you act at once!"

"But you'll go along with us, of course?"

"No, for some one must stay here to hold those devils in parley."

"Let me be that one, then."

"That would be worse than useless, sir. They know me, and unless they can see or hear me—No, I say! And now you've got to start: simply got to start, and no further chatter about it!"

Cora sobbed and came dangerously near to breaking down, but then a few whispered words from lips of true lover braced her nerves up, and knowing how just and reasonable his demands were, the maiden no longer resisted, but started as guide to brother and sister.

Not until they had passed fairly out of his sight did Alick McPherson draw a full breath, so intense was his anxiety as to the outcome; but then, hoping to effect a favorable diversion in their behalf, he lifted his voice and called out:

"I say, you fellows out yonder!"

"Well, what do you want?" bluntly responded the voice of Flashy Fred Hibbert, the Giant Train-wrecker. "Growing nervous, eh?"

"For fear you'd taken leg bail, yes!" jested the Telegraph Detective in turn. "Since it seems you haven't—"

"Oh, no; we're coming in there presently to take tea with you!"

"Well, you'll never complain that I don't make it hot enough for you, be sure!"

Seemingly Flashy Fred had no answer ready to cap this quirk, for silence fell over the scene.

McPherson was in no haste to break it, knowing as he did that every minute gained at this end must add to the chances in favor of an escape at the other; if he could only feel assured all that evil gang was congregated out yonder!

That was the uneasy point, but he had no method of learning the actual facts, so he could only wait for the ending.

That came a vast deal sooner than he expected, for from both sides of the cave entrance armed enemies sprang without the slightest warning in advance, yelling fiercely as they fired into the cavern mouth in evident hopes of ending the fight before it had fairly begun.

Taken completely by surprise though he surely was, Aleck McPherson rallied swiftly, shooting with each hand and fairly sweeping the mouth of the Lion's Crawl clear of living foes!

But then the main force came rushing up, eager to share in that unequal struggle, one of the foremost being Flashy Fred, his long golden beard and curling locks floating in the breeze created by his own swift passage.

One of those first shots struck the detective in his head, partly stunning him, and from that moment on Aleck McPherson fought through pure instinct rather than cool reason; yet one of his last acts before going down under a living mass of enmity was to send Frederick Hibbert reeling, gasping, gurgling back with a bullet through his lungs!

Then the brave fellow succumbed to odds, and when nearly suffocated, when bleeding from a dozen wounds, he was dragged out into the clear daylight, more than one savage voice was uplifted in vicious threats.

"Kill him! Slice him to cutlets! Rip his fool heart out and make him eat it without salt or pepper!"

But then another voice made itself heard: faint, husky, uncertain as no living man had

ever heard it before, yet still the voice of master!

"Stop, ye devils! Don't kill him—Stop, I say!"

It was the voice of Flashy Fred Hibbert, and those bloodthirsty demons acknowledged his mastery by staying their ruthless hands.

Flashy Fred tried to stand up, but failed, and pantingly added:

"He's given me my last dose, curse him! He's salivated me for keeps, but—I'll live long enough to—hang him! Make him stretch—hemp—and I'll—fit the noose—curse ye, Alick McPherson!"

CHAPTER XXX.

QUARRELING OVER THE SPOILS.

It seemed like tearing soul from body to leave her lover there to face such awful peril alone; but Cora Ball was an heroine in the best and truest sense of that much-abused term, and so yielded to what reason told her was for the best.

Although Rodney Zattell by virtue of his sex took nominal charge of the little party Cora was in reality the head, since she alone knew aught concerning the Lion's Crawl and without her assistance the others would quickly have lost their heads in that impenetrable darkness.

Bidding them keep close up, one halftouching the person in front, all moving in concert and according to such whispers as she might have to send back, Cora led the way through the damp-smelling passage, her head beating faster the nearer they drew to the other exit.

Had Uncle Nathan or Silas thought of blocking up this avenue of escape? Would they suspect any such knowledge on the part of Alick McPherson? Or—had they any idea she was with the fugitives?

There lay their brightest hope as Cora realized only too well.

If the Pollocks thought of her playing part in the game, they surely would remember how familiar Cora had grown with the Lion's Crawl, and then as surely block all escape from that quarter.

Her whispered warning as the dim light ahead told of their journey's end, kept all silent for the next minute or two; and then, as Cora communicated her fears in a whisper to the young man, Rodney looked to his guns, then crept silently forward to make sure all was fair weather.

Not a sound of warning peril came to his ears, and as he fairly passed the mouth, his keen looks around were equally unproductive.

He passed through the opening, rising to his feet and looking around on all sides above the vines and bushes, seeing naught to give alarm or uneasiness, then he called back to the girls:

"It's all right now! Come out, and we'll soon be far enough away from here for me to leave you in safety; then I'm going back to help that gallant McPherson out of his box!"

But the young man was taking entirely too much for granted, as the next few moments plainly proved.

Believing the way wholly clear, Cora and Felicia came forth from the Crawl, brushing their dresses, as they passed through the bushes to more open ground.

The blow fell without the slightest warning.

Three shapes sprang up from snug cover at the same instant, each one with a share of the capture marked out for his hands; and each one made a complete success of it all!

A swift stroke from a heavy club knocked Rodney Zattell down in his tracks, then a pair of sinewy hands gripped his throat viciously to shut off all possible outcry.

Another gaunt figure caught Cora Ball in his arms, clapping a horny palm over her mouth and grating out a savage threat of worse to follow unless she played white.

And with a low, snarling chuckle of vicious triumph Cyril Chatterton grasped Felicia Zattell, holding her powerless to scream or to struggle, capping her present misery by fastening his hot and hated lips to hers as though he would glue them there.

What else he might have done in that moment of devilish triumph can only be surmised, for Nathan Pollock harshly broke in with his warning.

"Quit yer blame' foolishness, boss! We've

got to rack out o' hyar in a holy hurry onless—kin ye manidge the young cub, Silas?"

"I kin tote him an' his load!" gruffly declared the twin, changing his grip now he was satisfied that one measured blow had effectually stunned young Zattell.

A twist and a heave, then Silas settled the insensible man across his broad shoulders, starting away from the scene of the capture like one who has a definite point in view.

"Come, boss!" impatiently added Pollock, at the same time swinging Cora up in his arms for safer carriage than trusting to her too nimble feet. "Fu'st ye know that ar' turrible, roarin', rantin', cavortin' cuss on ten wheels 'll be climbin' all over our back like—Scat, I'm tellin' of ye, boss!"

Now that the first flush of success had time to die out a trifle, Chatterton seemed quite willing to listen to reason of that shape, and lifting Felicia in his arms he followed close upon the heels of the old mountaineer, who likewise trod closely behind Silas.

They hurried over the ground at a rapid pace, considering the heavy burden each one bore; and then, wearying first, Chatterton ligermitted Felicia to feel her own feet, then as hurrying her remorselessly onward.

They had covered a considerable distance before aught coming from the rear gave warning of hot work yonder at the mouth of the Lion's Crawl; but as the distance-mellowed shots came floating to their ears, the three lamen halted and Silas rudely dumped his hload of senseless flesh at the foot of a tree.

"Hevin' of it hot an' heavy, back yender, C'pears like!" exclaimed Uncle Nathan, still grasping Cora for safe keeping, but with his ghead up, eyes glowing and nostrils quivering as though he could scent the battle from afar.

A low, choking cry escaped Cora's lips, and feeling that her lover was battling for dear life against dreadful odds, even if death had not already claimed him as its prey, she strove to break away and rush back to share his bloody fate.

But then Uncle Nathan quickly settled all that, by binding her arms behind her back, then taking a turn of the thong around the stem of a convenient sapling growing hard by.

Silas was engaged after much the same fashion, although he only had to do with a senseless prisoner; and, as though to keep in the fashion, Cyril Chatterton likewise bound his particular charge.

"Just to guard against your breaking that dainty neck of yours in a blind runaway, pet!" he mockingly said, winding up the proceedings by riding a kiss from those loathing lips.

All this was quickly arranged, yet by the time the trio had their captives fairly secured and their own hands thus left at liberty, the shooting over at the Lion's Crawl had ceased, and to all seeming the fight had been lost and won.

Chatterton bent an ear in keen attention for a brief space, then inhaled a long breath as he rose more erect, frowning a bit as he flashed his black eyes from face of father to son, then back again.

"Out trouble all for nothing, confound you for idle croakers! Flashy Fred has carried the den, and we might as well be yonder as here; and better, for that matter!"

"Waal, we've done ketched all we went after, hain't we, boss?"

"Yes, but—we've got it all to tote back again, don't you see?"

"Waal, now, that sort o' kind o' de-pends, boss!"

Something in that slow, meaning voice caused Chatterton to frown afresh, one hand mechanically moving toward the revolver at his hip as he sharply demanded:

"What do you mean by that, Pollock? How—depends?"

"Waal, sort o' de-pends on how big wages you're ready fer to pay us, boss. Or, to putt it down to a sharp p'int, jest how big a slice be we gwine fer to git out o' this yer pud-d'n?"

"An' that double slice right out o' the richest o' the mix, too!" supplemented Silas Pollock.

"Fer we've done jobbed our job, 'cordin to 'greement," added Uncle Nathan, with an irritating drawl in his tones that stung the hod-headed villain worse than so many net-

ties. "An' hevin' done that, we're ready fer our pay."

"In clean, hard cash, d'ye mind, too!"

"That of co'se!"

With difficulty Cyril Chatterton choked back his fierce rage sufficiently to permit him to say:

"All I promised you shall be paid you, gentlemen; but of course I don't lug a whole national bank around in my pocket. Give me a chance to get back to my supplies and I'll satisfy even your stomachs!"

Father and son interchanged swift looks, and, as though moved by the same wire, both heads shook in grim dissatisfaction.

"No pay, no goods," tersely decided Silas, and his worthy parent as promptly took it up:

"That's the size of it, boss. When you pays your good money, then you git your good live stock!"

"Why, you unconscionable scoundrels!"

"Hard words cain't break no bones, boss, but we're talking sober business right now. You pay, or you don't hev: so thar!"

"Of course I'll pay, and pay every dollar you can have cheek enough to demand," indignantly cried Chatterton, rapidly losing control of his fiery temper. "But you're asking impossibilities, man! How can I pay you gold which I haven't with me, you fool!"

"No pay, no git!" doggedly insisted Silas, stepping a bit closer to his especial charge. "We'll jest hold our grups on the boy an' gal, then, ontel you kin fetch the good kyne, boss!"

"I don't—never that, you devils!" flashed the Man from Wall Street, one hand dropping to his revolver-butt as its mate caught Felicia by an arm and swung her further to the rear as Nathan Pollock moved that way, seemingly with the intention of duplicating the action of his son, Silas.

"When you pay the price, then you kin hev the gal!" gruffly said Uncle Nathan, still advancing.

"Back, I warn you, fool!" fiercely cried Chatterton, his worst passions coming to the surface just when he ought to have kept cool. "Dare to lay the weight of a finger on this girl or upon me—"

"She's mine by the right o' takin'," doggedly vowed Pollock, his rifle-muzzle swinging to the front and a dangerous fire leaping up in his sunken eyes. "When ye pay fer her, you kin hev, not afore!"

Possibly Chatterton mistook that movement for an intention to shoot, for he jerked forth his pistol, firing on the instant; but swiftly as he acted, none the less rapidly did Nathan Pollock lift hammer and pull trigger, both men reeling back with groans of savage rage and pain!

CHAPTER XXXI.

FLASHY FRED MEETS HIS WATERLOO.

To all seeming the Giant Train-wrecker was mortally wounded, for with every effort to speak blood tinged his lips and trickled down over his yellow beard, forming a ghastly sight.

Yet even now he fought back the coming of death, determined to sup deeply if not long of fierce brute revenge, ere his spark of life should be extinguished for all time.

Some of the enraged ruffians showed some inclination to fly in the face of his commands, as though a dying chief had already abdicated; but as one of their number gripped the nearly senseless detective and lifted a bared blade above his head with a vicious threat, Flashy Fred lifted himself to an elbow, jerking up a gun and firing at the rebel.

His lead flew wide, thanks to the awful weakness which had so suddenly overcome that Hercules; but his meaning was only too clear, and with a muffled howl and curs combined, the brutal tough ducked low down and dodged away out of range for the time being.

"Save him—for the rope! I'll see hang—before kick bucket!"

This appeared to be the sole remain'g desire of the Giant Sport, so far as he could make his meaning clear during those first excited and exciting minutes; and, weakened though he plainly was, Flashy Fred still remained a chief among the bad gang.

Bonds were temporarily applied to the Telegraph Detective; then several of those who knew most about such hurts, looked after Flashy Fred, bandaging his wound, and, at

his own fierce command, plying him with whisky in order to keep his failing strength up.

Never mind if the liquor would shorten his brief span; he would see that human blood-hound sent on ahead to clear the way for his passage!

For the time being Flashy Fred was a man with a single mania; let him once see Alick McPherson stretch hemp; let him know, all room for doubting, that the pitiful detective would never live to triumph over his foe—would reap the rich prize they both had striven for—and he felt that death would not come nearly so hard to himself.

Forgetting all else, then, the big outlaw swallowed reckless draughts of whisky, rallying his failing powers as few men could have done even under such an incentive.

By the time Alick McPherson was recovered sufficiently to fairly realize his peril, Hibbert was able to urge matters along, and after that very little time was cut to waste.

Just at the edge of the open level in front of the Lion's Crawl stood a wide-branched tree, than which nothing could be better for an impromptu gallows, as Flashy Fred himself decided.

Over one of those horizontally growing limbs a rope was flung, the noose deftly arranged, and a number of the ruffians detailed to handle the rope beyond, when their wounded chief should give the death-signal.

While these arrangements were being made, Flashy Fred spit forth a small portion of his venom by telling his rival in love the doom in store, dwelling longest upon the horrible experience of slow strangulation.

If he really hoped to make Alick McPherson quail, or show signs of fear, Hibbert was widely off in his guess.

The detective knew his fate had been decided upon, and that no begging, no arguments he might present would avail him before such diabolic judges. The very best he could hope for was that the end might come to him speedily, if not painlessly.

He nursed one faint hope and consolation: since he saw nothing of Cora Ball or the Zattells, while even Flashy Fred made no mention of the girl they had both sought for a wife, he hoped the fugitives had escaped through the Lion's Crawl before the enemy could think of barring that passage; and yet—whither had Nathan and Silas Pollock gone?

And that black-avised villain, Cyril Chatterton?

Afraid to mention either name lest that might turn dangerous attention toward the fugitives, Alick McPherson locked his jaws doggedly, bearing all with the stern stoicism of a sublimely heroic nature.

But now, feeling his deathly weakness stealing back upon him in spite of the liquid poison which he had so liberally poured down his throat, the Giant Train-wrecker hurried up "the circus," lest he even yet should be cheated out of his sweet revenge.

"Put me where I—can see—the devil—kick!" he panted, huskily, motioning toward another tree only a few feet in front of the spot selected to witness the death of the Telegraph Detective.

And there, his broad shoulders supported against a tree-trunk, Flashy Fred bade the execution proceed!

With his arms tightly bound behind his back, Alick McPherson was placed squarely beneath the death-noose, the rope was fited snugly around his neck, all being jealously watched by Hibbert.

"Don't—too tight! Leave room for—wind to make—kick!"

And, shaking his dizzy head to clear his vision, Flashy Fred gave the signal; his fellows buckled to the rope, lifting the Telegraph Detective fairly off his feet, the heavy weight causing the fibers to stretch and letting the doomed man slowly turn around in air!

"Dance, you devil—dance!" hoarsely howled the Giant Train-wrecker, fairly beside himself with savage triumph and utterly inhuman delight.

Frothy blood came up in his throat and cut short his wild speech, running forth on his beard and making him an awful-looking object.

But, the ending came even more swiftly than any one of that lawless gang looked for,

as well as taking an entirely surprising shape.

"Clean 'em out, lads!" cried a clear, stern voice, blending with the whip-like crack of repeating-rifle.

Two of the ruffians grasping the rope let go all holds, staggering back, turning blindly around, to fall in death-agonies.

Instantly a rapid charge was made by a considerable force from near by cover, each man waiting as he came, one and all ready to kill that might save.

The Telegraph Detective fell limply to earth as those two frightened scoundrels lost their grip, and for a moment or two Flashy Fred seemed incapable of comprehending just what change had taken place.

But, as he saw the still living detective dropped to earth, and heard his own knaves shouting for quarter so soon, a cyclone of rage turned him fairly wild, and partly-raising himself up, he drew a revolver and tried to cover his deadly enemy.

In vain! His first shot went wild, both eye and hand failing him at the critical moment; his next shot was flung high into air, for a strong hand clutched his wrist and jerked his weapon up, while another set of fingers closed upon his throat.

One savage effort, and Flashy Fred sunk in a quivering, palpitating heap, conquered by that horrible weakness.

For a full minute that skirmish lasted, men firing as rapidly as they could work triggers, for a time too fiercely excited to heed if they heard those cries for quarter.

Take it all in all, a good deal of powder was burned without aught substantial to show for it; but those rascals who escaped death were taken prisoner, so the balance was easily struck.

Alick McPherson was insensible when anxious friends came to his assistance, but under their eager ministrations the brave fellow quickly recovered consciousness, and recognizing the faces of Sheriff Hawkins and Jaffrey Zattell among those surrounding him, the detective strove to arise, muttering something about Cora—the Zattells!

"My children; where are they now, I pray you, sir?" huskily cried the millionaire, agitated beyond what any living person had ever known of him before. "Don't tell me—say they are still alive?"

Alick brushed a trembling hand across his face like one striving to clear away a troublesome mist, and looked almost helplessly over his immediate surroundings.

He caught sight of Flashy Fred yonder, under guard although disarmed, and seemingly lying at death's very door.

That face served to clear away at least a portion of those mists, and, springing across to the defeated giant, McPherson fiercely demanded to know where Cora and the other fugitives had been taken?

One malignant stare, then—it seemed his expiring effort—the death-stricken train-wrecker spat a mouthful of frothy blood full into the pale face of his rival!

Hardly heeding the impotent insult, merely brushing a sleeve over his face, Alick turned away, speaking hoarsely:

"I remember, now! I sent them to escape the back way while I stood off the gang. They must have—I'll lead you, gentlemen!"

The brave man was reeling dizzily as he spoke, that ugly wound across his skull turning him faint and dizzy.

"Tell us how—Point out the way, Mac!" urged Sheriff Hawkins, a pitying hand resting lightly on that shoulder. "You can't—You're not fit to stir, man!"

"I'll show—I'm going if I go a corpse!" was responded.

With fierce resolution came those words, and, as few men could under similar circumstances, Alick McPherson rallied his powers of mind as well as of body, then staggered along toward the Lion's Crawl.

Lacking any other competent guide, the sheriff and his posse—which comprised the detectives summoned by wire to the assistance of the New York capitalist—followed the lead of the inflexible detective into the Lion's mouth, then into the utter darkness beyond!

This was by far the shortest method of reaching the other side of the ridge, but the determined McPherson did not stop to explain or to argue; just now he could only

remember that Cora had passed from his view along this same Crawl, and he must follow so long as a breath of life lingered to give him strength.

His wound was not bleeding much, but it gave him sore trouble; stooping caused such horrible throbbing against his skull!

Persistently the detective crawled on through the darkness, defying weakness and illness alike so long as aught remained which he could do toward finding or rescuing his sweetheart and the children; but, when he finally came to the adit and emerged into the warm air and brilliant light of day, a bloody blur covered everything around him.

"Look for sign!" he muttered, thickly, head seeming far too heavy for his neck to support. "I don't—Somehow my eyes are—going back on me!"

"Steady the poor fellow, lads!" sharply cried the sheriff, an expression of alarm and pity flitting across his rugged brow. "He'd never ought to be let come along, but he would have it so, brave heart that he is!"

"I'm not—leave go, you!" harshly cried McPherson, rallying sufficiently to fling off those friendly hands as he might have repulsed so many deadly enemies.

He strode forward a few paces, then stopped as if to look at the trampled earth for signs through which might be read the fate of the fugitives in whose safety his very life was now bound up.

Instead, he fell upon his face, nearly insensible!

Sheriff Hawkins, deeply concerned, turned Alick over to a couple of his posse for such care as they might be able to furnish him.

One of them, the ex-surgeon who had contributed so materially to clearing the detective from the charge of murdering Omaha Kid, was about to give his decision, when a sudden interruption came in the guise of a rawboned, gaunt mountaineer, whose empty hand flew up in answer to the instinctive gripping of pistols and rifles.

"Flag o' truce, gents!" he called out, his voice sounding strangely dull and lifeless, even as his leaden hue told of powerful emotions held in check, or of crushing misfortunes too great for him to bear alone.

"Who are you, sir?" demanded Hawkins, coming to the front.

"I'm Sila Pollock, boss; an' Pap is—"

That voice seemed to electrify McPherson, for he sprang up and staggered that way, hands clinching, as he hoarsely cried out:

"Cora—where's Cora, you devil? Tell me, or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

JUST AS IT OUGHT TO BE.

INSTEAD of recoiling or betraying fear, the Pollock Twin stood his ground, a slow, strange smile beginning to wrinkle his tanned face; but he spoke again, just as though the words were forced from his lips by an artificial pump:

"She's all right. It's Pap! I reckon thar's no sense in foolin' no longer, gents. Fer Pap—waal, Pap's done gone croaked!"

"Steady, McPherson! Look to him, boys! Now, Pollock, show us where the game is, or off comes your thatching in a holy hurry!"

Sheriff Hawkins grasped the twin in a relentless grip; but no resistance was made.

Like one moving and living in a dream, Silas turned and acted as guide to the company, leading them by the most direct route to the spot where knaves had so fortunately fallen out over the plunder.

Shouts and cries of eager delight went up from the rescuing party as they saw the prisoners; all still bound, yet each one living and seemingly unharmed!

Then, like one brought back to life again, Alick McPherson soon clasped Cora Bell to his bosom, laughing and whispering words of consolation and strength—he who so sorely stood in need of support himself but a few minutes before!

Their first thought was naturally given to the young people, but Sheriff Hawkins left them to the care of their more intimate friends, himself looking into the situation of the fallen outlaws.

He found Nathan Pollock already growing cold in death, but Cyril Chatterton was yet

alive, though shot through and through the body.

A brief but sufficient examination showed how short his span of life was at once the professional assumed the ascendancy—Hawkins striving to get at the bottom facts of the whole case ere it should prove forever too late.

"You can't do yourself any worse harm, my friend," he judicially declared, kneeling by the side of the dying villain. "You're too far gone to have any fears of stretching hemp unless—Well, maybe I can keep the boys from lynching you now, provided you'll make a clean breast of it all!"

"Bah!"

Just that one scornful ejaculation, but it contained a volume.

Experienced with like "nervy" rascals, the sheriff knew he would only be wasting his time practicing upon Chatterton, so he turned his verbal batteries elsewhere, deeming himself fortunate in having such a favorable subject to work upon as the Pollock Twin.

A dull, sluggish, unnatural stupor seemed to have fallen over Silas, for the time being although he remained bright enough so far as the workings of his mind and clearness of comprehension went.

In the death of his father the young mountaineer seemed to have lost all ambition, all hope in life so far as the future was concerned.

He answered all questions put to him as frankly as might be, making no attempt to hide aught, whether that revelation would incriminate himself or not.

He declared that Cyril Chatterton shot and killed Omaha Kid, taking the rifle out of Nathan Pollock's hands to commit the deed, fearing to trust his own revolvers, yet feeling that he must still that traitorous tongue in order to guard himself.

He likewise swore that Flashy Fred Hibbert was head and front of the Union Pacific train-wreckers, and that himself, twin brother and his father belonged to the gang.

He confessed a great deal more than is placed on record here, but it is not essential to enter more fully into details.

Another effort was made to gain a confession from Chatterton, but in vain. His bodily powers were rapidly failing him, and already the death-damp was perceptible upon his brows.

In less than another half hour the end came, that wrecked life going out in a fierce, terrible struggle which left his face a thing of horror to all who were forced to look upon it, later.

But, before that ending came, the majority of the rescuing party had returned across the ridge to the scene of the battle in front of the Lion's Crawl, where Flashy Fred Hibbert was found yet alive, although surely sinking down to death.

At first he refused to believe that Cyril Chatterton was dead (for that ending was so sure none deemed it a lie to briefly anticipate nature's course,) and not until Cora herself confirmed the tidings did he show signs of yielding.

Yet even then it was more recklessness than aught better which led the dying criminal to make a confession.

Why fight longer, since the game was surely lost?

From that confession, broken frequently, marked with periods of frothy blood, each one denoting yet another step nearer the grave, much that had been obscure was now cleared away and uncertain points made sure.

For one thing, Cyril Chatterton was in reality the brother of Frederick Hibbert, that last being but one of the many names borne by the wayward adventurer since fitting from the home-roof.

This explained in goodly part the coming together of two evil forces from such widely separated portions of our vast country, and told how Chatterton won over the train-wreckers to assist him in his daring schemes against the millionaire, Jaffrey Zattell.

Thanks to this co-operation, then, the train-wreckers had been warned from the summit of Pilot Knob in time to vanish from the scene before the armed Express could cover the distance between Silver Leaf Station and Grape-vine Gorge, that misty night.

Then, his strength visibly failing, Flashy Fred by turns cursed the Telegraph Detective, and pleaded with Cora to love him!

As the sun declined toward the west, so that evil life faded away until the end came: quiet and peaceful, in strong contrast to the life which had led up to this most wretched termination.

There is not very much more which calls for detailed record.

With the death of its master-spirit, Flashy Fred, that particular band of criminals was effectually broken up.

Some had been killed in the two fights in front of the Lion's Crawl, a few had managed to escape, while a number were captured and jealously guarded until they could be stowed away in safe-keeping for trial as train-wreckers and "bad men" in general.

Among these were Silas and Luke, the Pollock Twins, both of whom made no attempt at clearing themselves, asking permission to plead "guilty," and that their term of imprisonment might begin as soon as possible.

They were gratified at receiving a much lighter sentence than they looked for, and as they are model prisoners it is more than possible that they may emerge from those gloomy walls to lead a fairly respectable life for the rest of their days.

Jaffrey Zattell forced a truly munificent reward upon the Telegraph Detective for gallant services rendered; and, better yet, saw him started in a good business back East, where, according to the wishes of his beloved Cora, he agreed to live in quiet as compared with his recent life of excitement and danger.

For, of course, they were married, and both declare that they have never regretted taking that step in life; only sorry they hadn't taken it before!

Both Felicia and Rodney now have homes of their own, while Jaffrey Zattell is still hale and hearty, by no means a power to be despised in Wall Street, although he sometimes shows mercy to an unfortunate member who otherwise would lie utterly at his disposal.

Possibly he has learned a lesson from the nearly accomplished revenge of Cyril Chatterton!

But one thing is certain: not one of the Zattell tribe has or ever will take another trip over the Union Pacific toward the land of the setting sun.

That one experience will last a lifetime.

THE END.

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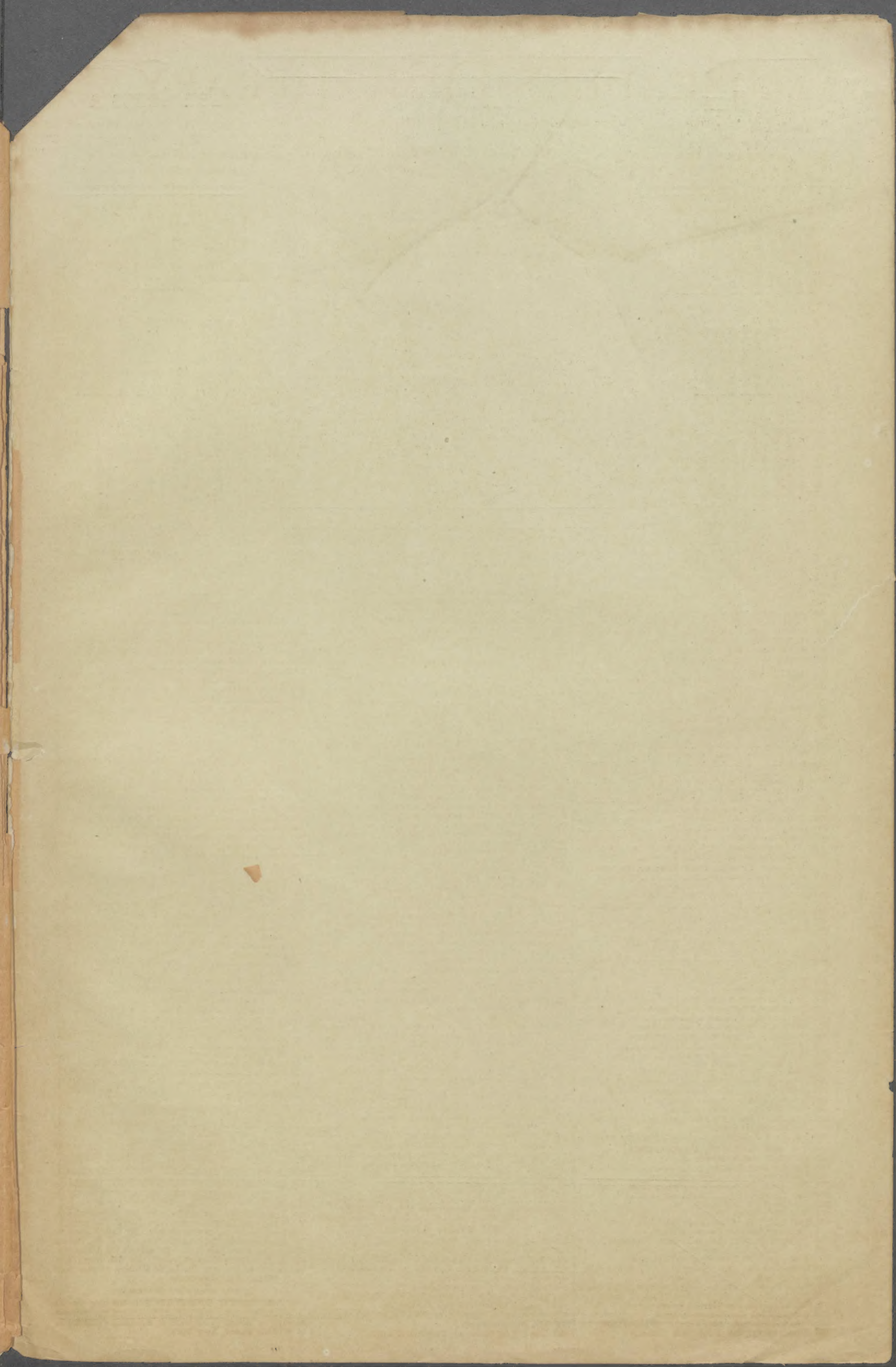
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